

Aide-de-Camp's Library



सत्यमेव जयते

Rashtrapati Bhavan
New Delhi

Accn. No. 858

Call No. VIII(C)-2

SLADE

BOOKS BY WARWICK DEEPING

SHABBY SUMMER
FANTASIA
THE MALICE OF MEN
THE WOMAN AT THE DOOR
BLIND MAN'S YEAR
NO HERO—THIS
SACKCLOTH INTO SILK
TWO IN A TRAIN
THE MAN ON THE WHITE HORSE
SEVEN MEN CAME BACK
TWO BLACK SHEEP
SMITH
OLD WINE AND NEW
THE ROAD
SHORT STORIES
EXILES
ROPER'S ROW
OLD PYBUS
KITTY
DOOMSDAY
SORRELL AND SON
SUVLA JOHN
THREE ROOMS
THE SECRET SANCTUARY
ORCHARDS
LANTERN LANE
SECOND YOUTH
COUNTESS GLIKA
CORN IN EGYPT

UNREST
THE PRIDE OF EVE
THE KING BEHIND THE KING
THE HOUSE OF SPIES
SINCERITY
FOX FARM
BESS OF THE WOODS
THE RED SAINT
THE SLANDERERS
THE RETURN OF THE PETTICOAT
A WOMAN'S WAR
VALOUR
BERTRAND OF BRITTANY
UTHER AND IGRAINE
THE HOUSE OF ADVENTURE
THE PROPHETIC MARRIAGE
APPLES OF GOD
THE LAME ENGLISHMAN
MARRIAGE BY CONQUEST
JOAN OF THE TOWER
MARTIN VALLIANT
THE RUST OF ROME
THE WHITE GATE
THE SEVEN STREAMS
MAD BARBARA
LOVE AMONG THE RUINS
THE MAN WHO WENT BACK
THE DARK HOUSE
I LIVE AGAIN

SLADE

by
WARWICK DEEPING



CASSELL
and Company Limited
London, Toronto, Melbourne
and Sydney



THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN COMPLETE
CONFORMITY WITH THE AUTHORIZED
ECONOMY STANDARDS

First published 1943

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON, LTD., THE
TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON
F.343

SLADE

I

I

FLORENCE was in one of her haphazard moods. She caught a toe in a corner of the dining-room carpet when she entered the dining-room with a tray of custard-glasses, for, in those days, custard was served in glasses which, in a more free future, would contain Dubonnet or Sherry or Gin and It. The glasses slid in a clattering avalanche to the floor and spilled broken glass and dollops of yellow matter upon the carpet. Mr. Marsland, glancing irritably over a nervous shoulder, remarked that there would be no mating of gooseberry tart and custard on this June day.

Florrie had tonsils, and was a mouth-breather. She was a good girl, though given to lapses, and when she lapsed her language slipped like her stockings. Mrs. Pomeroy was always saying to her: "Florence, pull up your stockings."

"Coo, oh—lordy, how did I come to do that?"

Mrs. Pomeroy, sitting at the head of her table, answered Florrie's question with dignity and restraint.

"Just carelessness, Florence, carelessness and too much haste. How often have I told you not to come into a room with your head in front of your feet. Get a dustpan and brush and a wet cloth and clean up that mess."

"Yes'm. I'm sorry, m'm. Fact is—the sole is coming off me shoe."

"More carelessness, Florence. Get a dustpan and brush and a wet cloth and clean up that mess."

Mrs. Pomeroy was serving gooseberry tart. Florence should

have distributed the plates, but since the Kidderminster carpet was Florence's immediate concern, it being a new one, Mrs. Pomeroy apologized for the disaster, and asked Mr. Truslove and Miss Popham if they would be so kind as to pass the plates. Mrs. Pomeroy was always urbane, if formidably so. Rarely was she seen out of black satin, with a white fichu fastened with an amethyst brooch. Big, blonde, high-coloured, high-bosomed, a Wellington of a warrior with a crisp and deliberate voice, she was never out of countenance, and never in flurry. It was said that Mrs. Pomeroy had suffered misfortune and unhappiness in her past. It was not—her—past, but the product of a disastrous marriage. Mr. Pomeroy was dead, had been decently dead for years, and his widow held her head high as though refusing to recapture the unpleasant odour of that self-same past.

The table sugared its gooseberry tart and ate it, minus custard, while Florrie, with heavy breathing, swept and mopped up the debris. There was silence, and Mrs. Pomeroy's silence was the most evident part of the stillness. Almost it was the silence in church after the officiating priest's last solemn Amen.

For, there was more behind Mrs. Pomeroy's silence than the mere pressure of disapproval and self-restraint. Florence had supplied her mistress with access to an inspiration. Mrs. Pomeroy had been waiting for some such occasion—however trivial—to make an innovation that she contemplated appear natural. Nos. 3, 4 and 5 Caroline Terrace had developed from a boarding-house into a Private Hotel, and its new dignity deserved service in trousers.

Mrs. Pomeroy broke the silence. She spoke to her clientele as to a friendly but docile committee.

"I really think I must engage a man."

Mr. Truslove grunted his approval.

"Excellent idea, madam. Someone with a feeling for boots."

"Quite so," said Mrs. Pomeroy, "someone who could carry up coal and luggage and wait at table. A properly trained man. I shall go up to town and call on Messrs. Garter and Pranson. I

believe that theirs is the most reliable agency in London."

Mr. Truslove was capturing the last gooseberry.

"May I make a suggestion?"

Mrs. Pomeroy was always gracious to Mr. Truslove. He was first floor and somewhat permanent.

"Why—certainly."

"With a trained man to wait we might have separate tables."

Mrs. Pomeroy did not snub him. She too had been contemplating some such development. It would be more chic, more productive of prestige. And Mr. Truslove was a particular and somewhat separative person. He hated having constitutional chatterers at his elbow, irresponsible maiden ladies who were bright and vivacious, and quite unable to refrain from neighbourly conversation.

2

It was Mr. Truslove's custom after dinner to put a comfortable chair out on his balcony, read the daily paper and then fall asleep. On reaching the first landing of the main staircase he would pass the door of Mrs. Pomeroy's private room, which also was her office. It was Mrs. Pomeroy's habit to keep this door closed, which was understandable, for a woman who had so many domestic duties, and both residents and staff to rule or humour, might claim the right of some seclusion. On this particular day Mr. Truslove paused, and hesitated, for Mrs. P's. door was open. Mr. Truslove, being a separative person, had to provide himself with human contacts by exercising a lively and inquisitive interest in other people's affairs. He stepped aside and knocked on the door. There was no answer, and Mr. Truslove entered.

The room was empty. Not even Rose, Mrs. Pomeroy's small daughter, was here to challenge him with her pretty primrose face. Mr. Truslove glanced round the room, but his eyes gave particular attention to the mantelpiece. Yes, that was the peculiar thing about the Pomeroy mantelpiece and the walls of the room.

There were no photographs. It was a very photographic age, so far as family portraits were concerned, and Mr. Truslove would have expected to see some portrait of the late Mr. Pomeroy upon the mantelpiece. It held a clock, various vases, two bronze figures, but no portraits. Nor were there any family groups upon the walls, especially those recording the sacrament of marriage.

Mr. Truslove sneaked out again, ruminating upon the strange absence of such records.

"Peculiar," thought he—"one would have expected to see the late Mr. P. about somewhere. Yes, very peculiar indeed! Now—I wonder—had—there been a Mr. P.?—And if so had he been quite respectable?"

Respectable! Mr. Truslove passed on, secretly chuckling, to his own room.

Respectability! Assuredly in no other age and in no other country had Respectability become so absolute and so necessary as in this Victorian England. Southfleet reeked of it, if such a virtue could be comparable with a smell. Mrs. Pomeroy's private hotel was so utterly respectable that the Immaculate Conception itself could not have been a fit subject for discussion. Virtue was everywhere, in the round-topped, black-seated dining-room chairs, in the chaste legs of the tables, in the anti-macassars, the pure white lace curtains, the sedate wall-papers, and especially so in the rather forbidding beds. No one could very well imagine unseemly raptures in or on these beds. Mr. Truslove, who was something of a Hedonist, had obtained permission to supply himself with a special mattress, and when he was absent, the thing was stored for him in the hotel's lumber room, and when he needed it it was taken out to air.

Mr. Truslove's own room had the privilege of being somehow male. He was allowed to smoke in it. A pipe-rack and tobacco jar stood upon the mantelpiece. It possessed a comfortable sofa which was not too stuffed with virtue, a bookcase full of yellow-back novels, and there were sporting prints upon the walls. In

the cheffonier lived a whisky decanter, a bottle of old port and half a dozen glasses. Even the table advertised a certain ironic untidiness, and the one thing Mr. Truslove would not tolerate was the tidying up of that same table.

Mr. Truslove lifted his chair through the french window, filled and lit a pipe, and taking the daily paper with him, sat down to digest his dinner. He was a wiry and active old gentleman of three-and-sixty, grizzled, sharp-faced, shaven as to chin, but wearing little side whiskers which were known as mutton chops. There were playful wrinkles round Mr. Truslove's grey-blue eyes, for Mr. Truslove—like many old gentlemen—was reverting to the mischievous moods of boyhood. He sat and smoked, and surveying life and the sea and sky, left his paper unread upon his knees. He could see much of Southfleet from this gazebo, and on this summer day it was like a plaque of blue and white majolica. The pier thrust a black nose into the sea. Immediately below him the trees and shrubberies of Caroline Gardens slung a green garland above the foreshore. The white Regency curve of Wellington Crescent turned a supercilious cheek away from the Old Town with its pubs, its cheap lodging-houses, its pleasure boats, and its black old jetty where tubby brigs unloaded coal. Mr. Truslove had a fondness for the Old Town. It was more alive and less respectable. People got drunk there. On Bank Holidays, if you strolled that way in the evening, you might be lucky enough to see a fight, or Cockney girls and Cockney lads dancing to a barrel organ. Mr. Truslove sat and saw and contemplated. This balcony was a good spy-point provided Miss Popham did not pop out on her neighbouring balcony, and start twittering at you. When this happened Mr. Truslove either took his chair inside, or pretended to be asleep.

A lady passed along by the gardens, a very rustly, silky lady with yellow hair and a sprightly bonnet, Mrs. Else who lived at No. 9. Mrs. Else was provocative and refreshing. She dared to be deliciously feminine in a world that took life in little, lady-

like sips. That quidnunc, the Rev. John Chatterway who occupied No. 11, had christened her "What Else?", which was pretty, and suggestive when coming from the lips of a cleric.

Mr. Truslove heard a door bang, and saw Rose Pomeroy scudding across the road in pursuit of Mrs. Else. Children liked the flavicomous lady. She smelled nice and looked nice, and was generous with candy and chocolates. Moreover, she did not talk to children as though they were half-witted and had been born inevitably to original sin.

Mr. Truslove sat up and smiled. Mrs. Else had turned at the sound of Rose's pursuing feet, and was waiting for the child, but she did not see Mr. Truslove's smile. Moreover, Mr. Truslove's smile was somewhat for himself. Three or four years ago he had thought of paying court to Mrs. Else, but a sage voice within him had said: "You're not up to it, my lad; you are too old," and Mr. Truslove had refrained.

"Hallo, darling," said Mrs. Else, "coming to listen to the band with me?"

"May I?"

"May you indeed, my sweet! It will cost me just fourpence. Does your mother——?"

"Oh, mother's going to London."

"Well, I'll play Auntie. Come along," and Mrs. Else bent down and kissed the child.

Mr. Truslove caught himself being sentimental. Why had not Mrs. Else children of her own? Just the sort of woman to be a mother. What had Else been thinking about, if there had been a Mr. Else?

The lady and the child disappeared beyond the green dip of the shrubbery where it flowed down Pier Hill, and to replace them Tom Swaine's "Victoria" turned the corner by the Regent Hotel, and came to rest outside Mrs. Pomeroy's. Tom Swaine remained on his box. It was evident that he had been ordered. He was an oddity, with a face like Punch, and a nose the colour of good red wine. In summer it was light claret, in winter port.

Mrs. Pomeroy appeared, dressed for some occasion, and Mr. Truslove, leaning forward, watched her enter the carriage.

"The station, Swaine."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Pomeroy put up her parasol, and Mr. Truslove lay back in his chair. Why the carriage, when the railway station was less than half a mile away? Oh, no doubt—prestige. Mrs. Pomeroy was becoming a prosperous woman, and prosperity deserved its panache.

Then, Miss Popham simpered out on to her portion of the balcony, and Mr. Truslove hurriedly put his paper over his head.

Damn the woman!

He had been caught. There was no time for disappearance. Mr. Truslove and Miss Popham played a game together, like two of those toy figures in a weather predictor. When one popped out the other popped in.

Mr. Truslove produced a snore.

II

I

MRS. POMEROY did much of her shopping in St. Paul's Churchyard or at the Civil Service Stores in Queen Victoria Street. She was a member of the Civil Service Stores. Meanwhile, a male person whom the agency appeared to have supplied with extraordinary promptitude, sat on a seat in the vestibule of the Stores and waited for his new employer.

An old black Gladstone bag was tucked between his feet, and the seated figure was as motionless as the bag. Its immobility was remarkable, suggesting an extreme docility, a peculiar and tame gentleness. The man's greyish hair was closely cut, his face clean-shaven. There were wrinkles round his quiet eyes. He looked

intelligent, almost a man of education. His hands rested on his knees with the same air of mute passivity. The fingers were roughened, the nails worn down. His mouth was the mouth of an ascetic. The only liveness seemed in his eyes, and this liveness contained a tinge of fear, rather like that of a shy bird that has been taken suddenly from darkness into the light. He watched the people who came and went, but without moving his head.

The man wore a bowler hat with a high crown, a blue serge suit, a white collar and black tie. His boots were carefully polished. They had square and bulbous toes, and their clumsiness did not match the rest of him. His wandering glances, and his stillness expressed a certain nervous bewilderment, as though the hurry and bustle of life were strange to him. You might have said that he was a clockwork figure which would not come alive until you turned a key.

Mrs. Pomeroy appeared upon the stairs, slung around with parcels. The man did not see her until she was close upon him. His face brightened in a sudden smile, and just as suddenly became dead. Mrs. Pomeroy's eyes had a peculiarly hard glazed look, and the glass was frosted.

"Take these—Slade."

The man stood up on his thin legs like a figure pulled by a string. He gave Mrs. Pomeroy one queer, questioning look, and then put out a hand for some of the parcels. He did not speak.

"I have ordered you an alpaca coat, Slade."

"Yes, madam."

"And a pair of boots. Eight was the size."

"Yes——"

An additional syllable had slipped off his tongue. Mrs. Pomeroy's eyes gave him a sudden and harsh glare. He looked frightened, confused, apologetic.

"Er—thank you, madam."

"Get a cab. You can leave the parcels and your bag. I will wait here."

"Yes, madam."

She watched him go down the steps and stand for a moment on the pavement with that peculiar air of bewilderment. Then, he disappeared. Mrs. Pomeroy sat down, picked up his bag, put it on her knees, opened it, and ran her hands through its contents. It contained nothing but a couple of shirts, a spare pair of boots, some underclothing, washing "materials", a razor in a case, and a book. The book was a Bible. Mrs. Pomeroy opened it, and it so happened that it opened where a card had been inserted. Mrs. Pomeroy looked at the card, and with a quick movement opened her own handbag and tucked the card away in it. Then she examined the fly leaf of the Bible, appeared satisfied with her inspection and returned the book to the bag. She had just done so when a growler drew up, and Slade, emerging from it, came up the steps and looked at her with the eyes of an apologetic dog.

"The cab, madam."

Mrs. Pomeroy rose.

"Very good, Slade—Carry down the parcels."

When the lady had entered the cab her new employee stood hesitant upon the kerb. The cabbie's box would not accommodate a second person, and Slade appeared to be shy of driving with his mistress.

"Get in, Slade—Tell him Fenchurch Street Station."

Slade spoke to the cabman, slipped his bag into the cab, and entering it, sat down deprecatingly on the seat facing his mistress. He kept his feet tucked in, removed his hat, and placing it on his knees, folded his hands over it.

Mrs. Pomeroy looked out of the window.

"I had better repeat to you, Slade, what your duties will be."

"Yes, madam."

"You will clean the knives, the silver and the boots. You will carry luggage up and down. You will be responsible for the front steps and the gardens. They are only small gardens. You will wait at table. You will make yourself useful in any other way that I shall indicate."

"Yes, madam."

Mrs. Pomeroy's eyes were resting on his hands.

"You must take more care of your hands, Slade."

"Yes, madam."

"Remember, you will have to wait at table—Yes, and you will have to carry up the coals. And if any of the gentlemen should need valeting you will valet them."

There was the same meek, gentle reply.

"Yes, madam."

2

Mrs. Pomeroy travelled to Southfleet in the corner of a second-class carriage, and James Slade in the corner of a third. Mrs. Pomeroy's compartment contained two other passengers, a middle-aged couple who had every appearance of being profoundly bored with each other. Slade's compartment was full, and its complement included an East End "Pearly", his wife and two very active children in a state of great excitement. It was a holiday affair, and both children had buckets and spades.

Slade sat tucked in his corner and watched them. He watched almost as though they were the first children he had seen for years, and their naturalness delighted him. These youngsters were so care-free and jolly. They trampled up and down from window to window and chattered and asked questions, until their mother reproved them.

"Come 'ere and sit darn, Ethel. You're treadin' on the gentleman's boots."

"I don't mind," said Mr. Slade.

A smile crinkled round his eyes. Ethel looked at him, and Ethel liked him. She too smiled, and made eyes at Mr. Slade, and wriggled and sucked a finger.

"Going to the sea, dear?"

"Yus."

"That will be jolly fun. Dig on the sands and paddle?"

"Yus."

Ethel wriggled and, lurching against Mr. Slade's knees, was lifted up on them.

"I've got a new 'at."

"What a pretty hat."

Ethel giggled.

"Where you goin'?"

"I'm going to Southfleet."

The mother bent forward and addressed Mr. Slade.

"If she's bein' a noosance, mister——"

"Not at all. I like children—What's your brother's name, my dear?"

Brother answered for himself.

"Syd."

"How do you do, Syd?"

"Nicely, mister, thank yer."

Father produced a big black bottle. He withdrew the cork, wiped the mouth with a handkerchief, and offered the bottle to Mr. Slade.

"'Ave a drop, mister, wiv me."

Mr. Slade gave a sort of shy little bow, accepted the bottle, and had a drop.

A tinge of colour came into his pale face. He looked like a man who had been starved and ill, and was feeling all the better for company, contact with simple humanity. Children might be crude little egoists, but they did keep you guessing, and reflecting that life was not all stale fish and sawdust. Mr. Slade had returned the bottle to his new friend, and the coster, having wiped it, offered it to his wife. She shook her head at him, and the feather danced in her big black hat. To-day she was feeling rather the mother and the lady. Her husband, glancing at the traveller opposite him, a precise and bearded person with spectacles and fierce eyebrows, thought better of it, and refrained. He took a pull at the bottle, gurgled, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and grinned at Mr. Slade.

"Lemme 'ave a drink, dad," said Sydney.

"What'll yer muvver say?"

Sydney's mother's response was an emphatic no. Sydney was told to put his hat straight. Her husband re-wiped the mouth of the bottle, and offered it again to Mr. Slade.

"'Ave another drop, mister."

Mr. Slade had another drop, or pretended to do so, and passed the bottle back again. The coster had a second pull, re-corked the bottle and, nudged by his wife, slipped it back into his pocket. Ethel was still making goo-goo glances at her new friend. Mr. Slade felt glad that he was in this third-class carriage, and not in the second with his mistress. Mrs. Pomeroy was a formidable person. Most certainly she would not have approved of these vulgar people and the black bottle.

The coster stood up and reached for something in the rack, a concertina. He looked at his fellow traveller, especially so at the forbidding gentleman, and then at Mr. Slade.

"Anybody mind a bit o' music?"

No one objected, and the concertina let out a squawk.

"Play—'Disy—Disy,' dad."

Mr. Slade nodded.

"Anyfink you'd like—particular—mister?"

"Can you play 'My Old Dutch'?"

"Not 'arf——"

"Please play it."

The coster began to swing the concertina to and fro, and the concert commenced. Ethel rolled to and fro on Mr. Slade's knees. Sydney sang in a nasal treble. The severe gentleman seemed to pin his eyes and his beard to his book. He got out at the next station.

Southfleet.

Mr. Slade kissed both Ethel and Syd, reached for his bag, said good-bye to mother and father, and opening the door, stepped

out on to the platform. Southfleet station was not a beautiful place, but black asphalt, cast iron pillars, glass roof, and liverish-coloured paint. Mr. Slade was struck by its ugliness, the utilitarian ugliness of that most respectable period. He stood there rather like an overgrown schoolboy, clutching his bag, and watching for the master to appear, and though a homeless creature, feeling rather homesick. Mrs. Pomeroy's compartment was some twenty yards away. She was at the window, and Mr. Slade saw her beckoning to him.

"Slade."

He turned and walked towards her.

"Open the door. These handles get so dirty."

"Yes, madam."

She was wearing new gloves, and her bored fellow travellers had left the train at the previous station. Slade put down his bag, and opened the door for her.

"You can bring the parcels out."

"Yes, madam."

"We shall take a cab. You will ride on the box with the cabman."

Slade seemed to wince.

"Very good, madam."

So, they passed down Southfleet High Street, Slade on the box, Mrs. Pomeroy where she had every right to be. Southfleet High Street was a medley of the old and the new. New yellow brick shops were sandwiched between more mellow and red brick buildings. Here and there a garden remained. Slade noticed one pleasant old white house with a green veranda standing amid trees. The vista ahead of him ended in sky and sea, with the blunt end of the pier standing up on its long black legs. Ships were passing up and down the estuary. The sunlight shone upon the sails of a schooner.

"That's pretty," thought Mr. Slade, and sighed; "she looks like a bird."

The cab turned the corner by Caroline Terrace, and Mr. Slade

saw the pleasant and sunny façade of that Georgian Terrace, with its rows of neat windows, its balconies, and its little front gardens spread like praying-mats. The railings might be green or brown or blue, but each garden was of the same colour and pattern, geraniums, lobelia, white marguerite, calceolaria. The broad, yellowish roadway flowed broad and tranquil towards the setting sun, and on the seaward side the old hollies and laurestinus and Austrian pines of Caroline Gardens sheltered the smaller gardens from the sea wind. A sudden brightness showed in Mr. Slade's eyes. The pleasantness of the place surprised him.

Slade climbed down and opened the carriage door, and Mrs. Pomeroy got out and told him to carry in the parcels. Slade had an armful of them and was turning towards the central doorway of the hotel when a child came running out of Caroline Gardens, a pretty, fairish child with gentle eyes.

"Mother——"

Mrs. Pomeroy had reached the doorway. She faced about, and saw Slade standing there like a man most strangely and suddenly stricken with palsy. Two of the parcels fell out of his arms. He was staring at the child as though some almost terrible and miraculous presence had risen to dismay him.

"Slade!"

Mrs. Pomeroy's voice was harsh and quick.

"Yes, madam."

"Carry in the parcels at once."

"Yes, madam."

"Rose, dear—come here. I have a present for you."

Mrs. Pomeroy put out a hand and took the child's hand in hers, and Slade, still with that look of amazement and suffering in his face, watched them disappear. Quite half a minute passed before he remembered to pick up the parcels that had fallen.

♦

III

I

MRS. TRUSLOVE, leaning over the rail of the balcony, observed with some interest the person and behaviour of Mrs. Pomeroy's new man-of-all-work. In bending down to recover the parcels Mr. Slade's bowler hat fell off and rolled against the railings. He put down one parcel to recover the hat, replaced it, and was stooping once again for the parcel when Mrs. Pomeroy's voice came out of the house.

"Slade."

His mistress's voice appeared to confuse and agitate the new employee. Once more his hat fell off, and wobbled about like some inebriated and ridiculous receptacle. Mr. Truslove chuckled. Rather a fumbling and ineffectual fellow—this! If he played the French clown with dishes and plates as he was playing it with his hat and those parcels, there would be disaster in the dining-room.

"Slade."

James Slade left his hat there and carried in the parcels.

"Yes, madam."

They were alone together in the hotel hall, and Mrs. Pomeroy spoke to him in a strange, fierce whisper.

"Pull yourself together, you fool."

Slade blinked at her. His lips trembled, but no sound came from them. He placed the parcels on a chair, and went out to recover his hat, bag, and the remaining parcels. Meanwhile Tom Swaine was waiting to be paid, and observing with sardonic relish the rather futile activities of Mrs. P's. new member of the staff. Funny old bloke—this, regular fumble-fist. Seemed scared of something. Mrs. P. might be a bit of a terror, but why lose your head and your hat because a woman was sharp with you?

"Slade."

"Yes, madam."

"Pay the cabman. Here is half a crown."

"Yes, madam."

Slade deposited his bag and parcels in the hall, took the half-crown and carried it out to Tom Swaine.

"Here's your fare."

"Thank 'ee," said Tom, giving Mr. Slade an ironic wink. "Two bob for the job and sixpence for love. If you want a bit of advice I'd say—keep yer hat on."

Mrs. Pomeroy was waiting in the hall. She had sent the child upstairs, and her immediate concern was the disposal of this rather agitated man. She had been observing him with dispassionate curiosity. Only to think——! And how she had waited for this day, with a kind of calm ferocity, and a self-love that did not forgive. Clara Pomeroy was one of those women in whom the more human emotions seem to freeze, to be replaced by an inexorable love of power, and an acquisitive eagerness in possessing that which was hers and more than hers. She was what is known as a good hater. She did not despise compassion, perhaps—because it was alien to her, and she did not understand it.

"I will show you your room, Slade. Bring your bag."

Her dominance seemed complete. She intended it to be so, and it pleased her. She had much to remember, and she did not forget what she had suffered in her pride, both of purse and of position. She had always said to herself that some day someone should pay in personal penance for the humiliation she had endured; and life had given her this inevitable and inexorable opportunity. She held the scourge, and the meek back was at her service.

"This way—Slade."

She went ahead of him down the stairs into the basement. In a dark and narrow passage she opened one door, and then another.

"This is your room. Put your bag down."

Slade appeared to take one quick look around the tiny room like a timid animal exploring a cage. The window looked out on

a white-washed wall, but the upper panes were patterned with a fringe of flowers. There was an iron bedstead, an old painted chest of drawers with one leg missing, a strip of old carpet, a washhand-stand and basin, a cane-bottomed chair. Over the chest of drawers was pinned a text—"I will repay" saith the Lord. Slade blinked at it. Had the warning been placed there for his especial benefit?

"Here—is your pantry."

Shelves, cupboards, a lead-lined sink, a brass tap. Mrs. Pomeroy opened a drawer.

"The silver is here. You will see—there is a list fastened on that cupboard door. I have checked it. You—will be responsible."

"Yes, madam."

"The glass is in this cupboard, cleaning materials in that other drawer. Behind the door you will find a green baize apron."

"Yes, madam."

"Have you slippers?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I will buy you a pair of slippers. You will wear them—when you are working about the house. Not, of course, when you are waiting at table."

"No, madam."

"Now, you had better unpack. Supper is at seven. For the first day or two Florence had better help you with your duties."

James Slade sat down on his cane-bottomed chair. It wobbled, and creaked under him. His bowler hat lay on the bed, looking like a great black tumour swelling from the cheap blue counterpane. He stared at the white-washed wall of the area and the fringe of flowers in the garden above, with the sunlight shining through them. It occurred to him that this underground room would be very dark in winter, and that it seemed a strange

economy to burrow into the ground when there was so much earth at man's service. By what light would he go to bed and get up on dark winter mornings? A candlestick standing on the chest of drawers answered that question. His glance travelling round the walls, remained fixed upon the text.

"I—will—repay," saith the Lord.

Was that Clara's judgment upon him? Had she planned and ordered this penance? Well, according to Clara no doubt he deserved it. He may have been a desperate fool, but Clara was not the sort of woman to tolerate folly, especially when it ended in failure. And he was a complete failure, a disgraced failure, and all through the years that had passed he had learned to accept failure, or material failure. Yet there was that other spirit.

But—the—child!

Why had Clara kept it from him? Had her secretiveness been inspired by cruelty or kindness? Kindness—to the child, of course. Wasn't that obvious? Would he not have chosen silence, the blank page, the closed book? Yes, most certainly, for the child's sake, in this most respectable world—and yet——!

There could be pain in too much thinking. The world that he had lived in for the last seven years had taught James Slade that it was better that a man should have sore fingers than a sore soul, unless—of course—he had discovered that faith, which is an assuagement and a balm. Yes, that and God. If God was with you people might not matter so much. The thing was to be busy, and James Slade got up, hung his hat on a peg behind the door, and lifting his bag on to the chair, opened it and began to unpack. The bag contained all his worldly possessions, such as they were, a couple of cheap shirts, a pair of pants, a vest, three white collars, a razor, two nightshirts, a sponge-bag, and his Bible. James Slade lifted out the Bible, and opened it in search of a particular object, his legal label. It had gone!

He stood and stared at the open book. It had opened at the Gospel of St. John. Then he ran his fingers quickly through the pages to make sure. The card was not there. Had Clara taken it?

But how and when? When she had sent him for the cab? Oh, possibly. Clara was taking no chances. She had impounded that passport to partial freedom as she appeared to have impounded his person. James Slade closed the Bible and placed it on the chest of drawers, and proceeded to unpack and put away his possessions.

But he did own one leaf torn from the book of the past, a relic of whose existence Mrs. Pomeroy was ignorant, and having completed his unpacking, James Slade sat down on the bed and let his fingers explore the inner breast pocket of his coat. He glanced at the door. There was neither key nor bolt. So, even his privacy was relative! Well, a chair might prevent a sudden invasion, and having cocked the chair with its top rail under the handle, James Slade sat down again on the very hard bed, and brought out his relic. It was a very old and faded photograph showing a comely young woman seated with her husband standing behind her. The man was smiling rather fatuously, the young woman looking straight into the camera, a very hard and handsome and determined young woman.

James Slade smiled at his own silly smile. How well he remembered the photographer's appeal.

"Smile, sir, if you please. Just moisten the lips, and smile. That's better—much better. Now, quite still, please."

But footsteps were to be heard on the basement stairs. Mr. Slade smuggled the picture back into his pocket, and jumped up to remove the protective chair.

Someone knocked.

"Come in."

It was Florence, a below-stairs Florence who spoke as she pleased and in the vernacular about the above-stairs order. She had no reason to be shy of this elderly man, and she was not shy of him. Mr. Slade did not look capable of killing a flea, and Florence was ready to address him as Dad. In fact, in a week's time the below-stairs world was to know him as Dad, and to accord him respect and a growing affection.

"She—says I've got to tell you about things. My name's Floe."

Mr. Slade placed the chair for her.

"Sit down, Florence."

Florence sat down. Mr. Slade could be considered the perfect gentleman.

"Don't mind if I do. On my feet most of the day, and she chasing you round. And I've got a corn that nothin' wont touch."

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Slade. "Have you tried Bland's Corn Solvent?"

"No, I 'aven't."

"Well, you try it. Is it a hard or soft corn?"

"Hard. Right on m' little toe."

"Well, you try it. Now, what about giving me a little advice."

Florrie took a deep breath.

"Supposin' I tell you about some of the blokes. There's ol' Truslove, fussy and all that, but 'e ain't a bad sort, and e's better than some of the ol' women. 'E's always served first."

"What, before the ladies?"

"Well, 'e's a perm, and he pays more than anybody else. But p'raps I'd better begin about 'Er."

"Mrs. Pomeroy?"

"Yus. She can be a fair terror. Don't you ever answer 'er back. And don't try no tricks with the sugar. I believe she counts every blessed lump. And you've always got to appear to be doin' somethink—even if you ain't got anythink to do. Just flick a duster abart, or make believe you're polishin' somethink. Don't you ever let 'er catch you sittin' down."

Florence paused to draw a deep breath.

"She says you're going to do the boots and the coal and the luggage, and wait at table, and clean the silver."

"I understand so."

"Well, you be very partic'lar about the plates and the forks. She's dead nuts on a dirty plate. And don't you go offerin'

second 'elpings to the third floor, specially the third floor backs. She—don't like it."

"Mr. Truslove, I presume, has——?"

"Oh, 'e always can 'ave a third, if 'e wants it. So can Mr. Spiceby, and Miss Popham. You treat the first floors to anythink and sometimes the seconds."

"I see—Florence. Various gradations and values."

"Coo, you do use long words. And don't you use too much blackin' on the old women's boots, and be careful of the coal. She's got an eye like an 'awk."

"Thank you, Florence. Tell me, she has a daughter."

"Oh, Miss Rose. She's a fair little pet. Don't know where she got 'er nice nature from. Not from 'Er. Must 'ave been old Pom."

"And who and what was old Pom?"

"Well, if you ask me—that's a bit of a mystery. Lawks——" and Florrie giggled—"we do say in the kitchen that there wasn't a Mr. Pom. Cos she's so respectable, goes to church reg'lar. But 'e must 'ave been a good sort must Mr. Pom, judgin' by the kid. Can't see as 'ow she got a nice nature from 'er mother."

Mr. Slade smiled vaguely at this fanciful picture of a gay and gallant Mr. Pomeroy. Well, well, well, Florence was proving valuable as the hotel cicerone, and the advice she was giving him was both intimate and technical. Had Florence five minutes leisure? If so Mr. Slade would be glad to be shown the intricacies of the basement. Florence was more than willing. The staff tea was at half-past five in the kitchen, and at nine there was a spot of supper, bread and dripping, and sometimes cheese. The hotel took its supper at seven. So, Mr. Slade was led along a dark passage to the kitchen and was introduced to Eliza the cook, May the kitchen-maid, and Jane and Bertha the house-maids. Eliza was fat and fiftyish with fierce black eyebrows and an incipient moustache. She looked formidable, and was not, provided her authority was not flouted and no one complained of the soup. May was a cheeky little blonde, with bright blue

eyes. Jane had a dark, slim dignity. Bertha was brown and pink-cheeked and very sentimental.

Mr. Slade gave Eliza a polite little bow.

"Pleased to meet you."

Eliza looked him over as though she had mistrusted the novelty of having a man messing about the place, but there was a shyness about this gentle and elderly man that somehow moved the maternal soul in Eliza.

"Had your tea, Mr. Slade?"

"As a matter of fact I haven't. But please don't trouble."

"It isn't any trouble. May, put the kettle on again. It'll be ready in five minutes."

"Thank you very much. A cup of tea is a comfort. Meanwhile Florence is going to show me round."

So Mr. Slade was introduced to the coal-cellar, and the cupboard where brooms, etc. were kept, and to the back stairs which led up into the back garden, and the wine cellar which, of course, was locked.

"Beer and stout, mostly," said Florence, "and ain't she careful about it. Not 'alf."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Eliza, whose surname was Cotgrove, had given it as her opinion that Mr. Slade was a nice, gentlemanly old chap, and that he looked a bit starved, and needed feeding up. And he wouldn't be any bother about the place, and didn't look the sneaky sort—neither. The kitchen had been somewhat prejudiced against a strange importation in trousers, some fellah—who—as Mrs. Eliza put it—might have upset the girls.

3

Mr. Slade had been given leave to go out. Florrie had brought him the gracious permission from above-stairs, and also a sheet of notepaper in an envelope upon which Mrs. Pomeroy had recorded the hotel's decalogue, so far as he was concerned. On this first evening he was to be allowed his freedom, such as it

was, because neither his boots nor his coat were quite suitable for waiting at table.

Mr. Slade put on his bowler hat, and left the hotel by the area steps. He understood that he was not to appear above-stairs, save when on duty. Finding himself in the broad roadway between the terrace and Caroline Gardens, Mr. Slade was attracted to the gardens, only to find that the gate was guarded by a gardener in a green coat and red waistcoat.

"Ticket, please."

Mr. Slade explained that he was not a ticket-holder, but that he came from the Caroline Hotel.

"That's good enough. Mrs. P's. a subscriber. All residents are admitted, sir."

The gardener swung the iron gate open, and Mr. Slade entered with a "Thank you", and a gentle and secret chuckle. So, authority had taken him for a resident! He found himself in a broad alleyway between hollies and laurestinus, with seats tucked away in green recesses. It was a warm June evening, and Mr. Slade, discovering an empty seat, sat down to read Mrs. Pomeroy's table of the law.

He was to be allowed one free afternoon and evening a fortnight.

He was to return punctually at ten.

All public houses were forbidden him. Well—that was a superfluous precaution as he had no money in his pocket, and wages had not been mentioned.

He was not to smoke.

On Sundays he would attend evening service at St. John's Church.

He was to rise at six each morning; and go to bed at ten.

He was not to waste candles by reading in bed.

His laundry would be charged to the hotel.

He would take his meals in the staff kitchen, but he would not be allowed to loiter there. When not on duty he would remain in his own room.

Mr. Slade, having read the rules of his new prison-house, folded up the paper, and tucked it away in his pocket. Well, well, well, he might be a free man on probation, but Clara's supervision promised to be more stringent than that of the Law. Yet could he blame her? Life had taught James Slade to be chary of attributing blame to poor humanity. So often it could not help itself, but blundered and floundered towards disaster, just as he had done. Moreover, Clara had fought her fight, and like some indomitable Amazon, beaten off the assaults of bitter misfortune. She had a home, property, a prosperous business of her own creating, and Rose. Mr. Slade sat with a little shimmery smile on his face, and meditated upon the amazing reality of Rose.

There would be pain here, and secret pangs, and a surrender and sinking of self that might fill him with a feeling of starved frustration. However much he might yearn over the child, it was right and inevitable that she should never know, or have her future in this most respectable world clouded by the consciousness of shame. Even the fictitious Mr. Pomeroy was dead, as dead as Dickens.

IV

I

MR. SLADE got up and wandered. He was in a wandering mood, like a child let out of school, only much more so, for such vagrant moods had for years been denied him. It might have been said of him by the clever and the critical that he had become simple-minded, which was not quite true. The more urgent greeds of the flesh had departed from him. Indeed, he was returning to the world like a child, and a rather innocent child, as a serene and celibate old man who had regained the wonder of childishness. Strange as it might seem the penal life he had led had

not coarsened or debauched him. On the contrary, he had found God.

How pleasant was the greenness of these chestnut trees! Mr. Slade had passed the white portico of the Regent Hotel, and the buxom bow-front of Prospect House, the doctor's house. Here, in the High Street, the old timber-yard remained, with the evening sunlight shining on its chestnut trees. Mr. Slade looked up into the green canopies that seemed layered with gold. How gentle and good and comforting were trees! The doors of the sawing-shed were shut, the saw silent, the engine asleep. Great boles of timber were stacked in the yard, and piles of newly-ripped planks. A huge heap of sawdust was lit up by the light through the trees. Here were the quick and the dead, sap and mere sawdust, and yet there was beneficence in the labour of men.

Mr. Slade wandered back to the broad space above the pier hill. What a pleasant prospect, the sea, ships, the greenness of the gardens, the white curve of the Crescent, the black holly hedges guarding the broad way leading to the church. The windows of Caroline Terrace caught the oblique sunlight and flashed it back; the little gardens glowed; the sloping green roofs of the balconies were homely and warm. Mr. Slade felt like a child, wondering at the beauty of things as he saw them, and content to see them like that. Life might have its sorrows and its frustrations, but if God stood with you, fear might cease from troubling your soul.

Mr. Slade turned to walk down the hill, and as he did so a small boy ran up to him, a brown-faced, freckled child in a sailor suit.

"Oh, could you tell me the time, please?"

Mr. Slade's right hand went by instinct to the place where the watch-chain should be. There was no chain there. The habit of long ago had been suddenly resurrected after the long lapse of years.

"Dear, dear, I have left my watch at home. I am sorry, my dear."

"Do you think it is seven o'clock yet?"

"I think it must be."

"I promised mother I would be in at seven. I've been out with Mr. Clements in his boat. I'm learning to row. Look, I've got a blister."

"So you have."

"I had better run home."

"Yes, my dear. One musn't break promises—or blisters." The boy smiled up at him and ran on towards Caroline Terrace.

Mr. Slade stood a moment, and then walked on. Funny about that watch and chain! They had been of gold and he had left them behind with Clara, yes and rather secretly so, for he had left poor Clara so little. Then, after all these years, memory had played him a trick, and he had felt for the watch that was—where? Pawned or sold long ago, no doubt. How your old self suddenly was resurrected! But not as it had been, or could be. Clara had been very frank in her judgment upon that point.

"I will give you a chance to rehabilitate yourself."

Rehabilitate! Rather a pompous phrase—that! Clara always had had a liking for such words. Rehabilitate—but not resurrect. Men such as he had been did not rise again from the dead, to be reclad in the garments of respectability. Respectability! Horrid word! But what a nice, frank, freckled face the boy had shown him. Children, perhaps, were not bothered by the problems of respectability.

Mr. Slade strolled down the hill to the more plebeian part of Southfleet, where respectability was of less account and the language far simpler. Passing the pier entrance he paused, provoked by the wooden turnstile and the apostolic face of the old man who sat at the receipt of customs. It cost you the sum of a penny to pass that turnstile, and Mr. Slade had not a penny upon him. The Law had set him free with two half-crowns in his pocket, but Mrs. Pomeroy—as a precaution—had insisted upon his handing over such petty cash.

Assuredly, the petty cash promised to be a serious problem. Wages had not been mentioned. But, surely, he would be the recipient of some tips, and Mrs. Pomeroy could hardly expect him to pass on the largesse? Or, would he be like a schoolboy to whom the mistress of the house would assign sixpence per week?

The hairy and apostolic head of old Rawlins poked itself through the ticket-office window. Old Rawlins was always ready for a gossip, for his was a sedentary and a monotonous job.

"Thinkin' of going on, sir?"

"Well, it is rather late, isn't it?"

"We close at dusk. 'Ardly worth a penny unless you want a peep at the sunset."

"I can see the sunset from here."

"That you can, sir. 'Ave to close at dusk, you know, for the sake of respectability."

Mr. Rawlins chuckled and then sucked his teeth.

"The seats 'ud be full o' lovers, canoodlin'."

"Would they?"

"Yus."

"Well, I don't see any great objection to that."

Old Rawlins winked at him.

"Nor me. But this 'ere town is a temple of respectability. Such goin's on can't be allowed in public."

"But young people must fall in love."

"Not 'ere, sir, in a public place."

"It seems rather hard on the lovers. Does the public expect them just to walk up and down?"

"Why, yes, sir, but not sit down, much less lie down, 'cept—where you can't see 'em or tread on 'em."

"Then—where do they go?"

Again old Rawlins winked.

"Where lots of those there respec'able ladies would like to be, tee-hee, under the bushes on the cliff. Gawd, sir, there's a lot o'

ruddy 'umbug in this 'ere world. Funny, ain't it, that it should be respec'able to be a muvver or a farver—but the business of doin' of it—is shockin'."

Mr. Slade indulged in a gentle chuckle.

"Yes, it does seem strange, doesn't it. Well, I think I'll take a little stroll along by the sea."

"That won't cost you nothin', sir. The respec'able ol' cats can't keep the tide from comin' in."

Mr. Slade strolled on, a little bothered by the propensity both these old gate-keepers had shown towards addressing him as "sir". Was it a tribute to his age, and did he look as old as all that, or had he failed to lose the characteristics of his caste? Well, if that was so, Clara might have something to say about it, for Clara had always had a lot to say about everything. He would have to learn to play his part, helped by a green baize apron and shirt sleeves; and any mild aroma of gentility that still clung to him might be excused on the plea that he had been butler to a Bishop. Yes, that was an idea! He might even dare to suggest it to Clara! Moreover, life might be more simple and easy and comforting were he allowed to become an obscure member of the lower orders, and attain to the distinction of being classed as common.

Mr. Slade wandered along the esplanade as far as the Ship Hotel and Vandevord's Jetty. There were many more people here, though Southfleet's full season did not flourish until August, but the old town had a hearty human smelliness that could be refreshing. You could buy shrimp-teas, and whelks and cockles, and play on the concertina, and dance in the middle of the road. The old town was the East End's playground, and when it played it did not say—"Excuse me." But the pleasure yachts were berthed for the night, and the sixpennorth of sea-sickness over. The pubs were fulfilling their functions and in the yard of the Ship Inn a fight was in progress between a large and clumsy mariner and a little coster from London. Mr. Slade crossed over and joined the crowd, and was glad to see that the little

man was getting the best of it, skipping around and fooling the large and truculent fellow, and smashing his fists in his face. Mr. Slade sighed, eased his hat, and passed on. Well, that might prove a happy omen. He himself was up against a very large and truculent problem.

It was growing dark when Mr. Slade returned to Caroline Terrace, and blinds were down and curtains drawn. His mood was for a short sojourn on one of the garden seats, for the day had been a long and exciting one, and James Slade suddenly felt tired. But the garden gate was locked for the night, so he leaned against the railings under the shadow of a holly, and looked across at the terrace. Familiarity had not yet bred acquiescence, and there were many things about this respectable world that struck Mr. Slade as being peculiar. Why pull down blinds and draw curtains on a summer night? Why shut out the air and the stars? Why cultivate a prim stuffiness? Or was this a sign and a symbol of the respectable world in which all the natural nudities of life were covered up and concealed? Propriety was a universal petticoat sweeping the pavement, but hiding such indecent things as legs.

Well, he rather wanted to go to bed. He toddled across the roadway, and spotting the Caroline Hotel lettered upon the glass panel above a door, he groped for the area gate and descended into the gloom. A sudden scuffling sound surprised him. He became aware of two dim figures abruptly disentangling themselves. One figure withdrew to the far end of the area; the other vanished through a doorway.

Mr. Slade cleared his throat, dallied for a second or two and then entered by the self-same door. In the dim light of the passage he found Florrie waiting for him.

"Oh, it's you!"

"Yes, only me."

"You won't tell on me, will you? Just my brother came to see me."

"Of course I won't tell, my dear."

"Coo, you're an old sport, you are. You see, she's got such a nasty suspicious mind."

"Don't you worry, my dear. You can have twenty brothers to see you, and I shan't see them."

Florrie kissed him.

"You must 'ave been young too."

"Yes, my dear; once—I was."

2

The bed which Mrs. Pomeroy had provided for him was a hard one, but James Slade was accustomed to harder beds than this, and he accepted it as a couch of his own making, but before going to bed he knelt down by it and read by candle-light a portion of his Bible. The passage happened to contain that saying—"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth", and though James Slade meditated upon that text after blowing out his candle, he did not foresee himself inheriting anything. Even a dog would be denied him in a place such as this; as for the child—Mr. Slade could not bring himself to think too much of her. She was no more than a pretty thing in a picture hung well out of reach, and he knew that Clara would keep it out of reach.

James Slade was very tired. The very strangeness of it all had tired him, and he slept like a child, but he did not wake like a child. Urgent responsibilities were upon him, and they sat up with him in bed. The subterranean window of his monk's cell was an open eye, and James Slade, having no watch to advise him, threw the clothes back and emerged. Six o'clock was the official hour. Was it six o'clock yet? Assuredly he must persuade his mistress to allow him a watch, though it might be only a five shilling Waterbury. Mr. Slade, still in his nightshirt, opened the door, and stood listening. Was the house awake yet? He could not hear any movement in it, but to make safety doubly sure he slipped into socks, shirt and trousers and crept out in search of a clock. From somewhere came the sound of solemn and deliberate ticking, and Mr. Slade, having located the sound, pursued it.

The clock was in the kitchen. It stood on the mantelshelf. It had a large white face, and below it the picture of a windmill standing in a patch of greenness against a very blue sky. It was a supercilious, bare-faced snob of a clock, and it seemed to stare contemptuously at Mr. Slade.

"Tick-tock, it's only half-past five, you silly old fool."

Mr. Slade went back to his room to wash and shave himself. Cold water had to serve for that operation. Had he been more bold he might have tried the tap of the kitchen boiler, but on this first morning he was very meek.

Eliza and the other maids slept in the basement, with iron bars at their windows to discourage burglars, and to preserve their morals. Mr. Slade had no bars to his window, but there were other and palpable bars confining his soul. He put on his green baize apron, took a broom, and moved towards the kitchen stairs. It was more than probable that Mrs. Pomeroy might be up and about to satisfy herself that Slade was beginning his new life with punctuality and precision, and James was still very much in awe of Clara. She held him like a little old manikin in the hollow of her hand. Mr. Slade's inspiration was to begin work by sweeping the doorsteps and the paved paths between the little gardens. Should Mrs. P. poke her head out of her window she would see him at work below. Mr. Slade had reached the foot of the basement stairs and had begun to ascend them when he heard other footsteps coming from above. So quick and soft and tumultuous were they that James Slade was puzzled. Could Florrie or May or Bertha be coming down like this? Besides—— But he was allowed no time to meditate upon the significance of these fluttering feet. A small, vague figure poured down the stairs upon him in the half-light, tried to stop, overbalanced, and was caught in James Slade's arms. He had dropped his broom in time for the complete embrace.

"Hold up, my dear."

For a second the child seemed frightened.

"Oh—who are you?"

The little warm figure in its nightdress went rigid and hard.

"I'm the new—man."

"Oh, of course. You're Slade."

"Yes, just Slade."

He felt the child relax. She let him set her on the stairs.

"I've just come down to see Eliza. You won't tell, will you, Slade?"

"No, my dear."

"Eliza lets me get into her bed. She keeps a box of goodies——"

Mr. Slade nodded his head at her and smiled.

"I see. Goodies——"

"Yes, mother won't let me have sweets. She says it is bad for my teeth."

"You have pretty teeth, my dear. I don't think that Eliza's sweets will do much harm."

The child smiled back at him.

"I think I like you."

"That's good, my dear. Go on liking old Slade. Now, hadn't you better go to Eliza. Supposing——?"

"No. Perhaps I had better go back upstairs."

"And pop back into bed. Yes, I think I should."

"What are you going to do?"

"A little bit of tidying up."

The child turned and scurried back up the stairs, and Mr. Slade, having watched her little pink feet disappearing, ascended and unlocked and unbolted the front door. He had a sudden strange feeling that other doors had been unbolted for him. Well, well, well! He whistled softly as he looked at the morning, and began to sweep the steps and paths. The flowers in the small garden were wet with dew, and there was this other dewy thing so near him in this new world. Clara might be her mother, but somehow the child might be nearer to him than she was to Clara.

Mr. Slade bent over the railings and put his nose to the wet flowers.

V

I

BOOTS!

James Slade remembered that the business of the day began with boots. The working part of the hotel was now awake, pulling up blinds and drawing curtains, sweeping and dusting, lighting the kitchen fire, preparing to carry up shaving water, laying the breakfast-table, thinking of fried sausages, bacon and eggs. Mr. Slade hurried upstairs in slippers and baize apron to collect the hotel boots. It would not do for him to be late with boots on this, his first morning. And, obviously, you began with the first floor, and particularly with Mr. Truslove who was an early riser and liked five minutes stroll before breakfast.

Mr. Slade's new self-education commenced with the collecting of boots, and on that first morning he made a most horrid mess of it. So eager was he to be punctual in the polishing of shoe-leather that he gathered boots haphazard into his green apron, and bundled them downstairs, quite forgetting to identify each pair by marking them with chalk. Brushes and blacking were ready to hand on a shelf in the pantry cupboard, and Mr. Slade paraded his boots and got busy. Which were the Truslove boots? God Almighty, but he had muddled up the hotel foot-gear! Here was a pretty problem!

Oh—agony and bloody sweat! In his dismay he went in search of Florrie, and found her busy in the dining-room.

"Florrie, my dear, I've muddled up the boots. What—am—I to do?"

"Lawks, you don't say so!"

"I do say so. Can you—identify—the——?"

"I'll have a try, Dad. I should know most of 'em," so Florrie hurried down below with him, and set herself to sort out the footgear.

"Them's Mr. Truslove's. Buttons. He's fussy about boots and likes 'em smart. Yes, that's Popham's, them with the new laces. Those bobbly ones are Sawkins's; he 'as corns. Them's Miss Goodbody's, the prim ones with pointed toes——"

So, the selection was carried through, and Mr. Slade, finding a stubby pencil and an odd bit of paper, scribbled down the various names, and dropped an improvised label into each boot. God be thanked Florrie had saved the situation for him, and was repaying him for blindness as to brothers. He set to work on Mr. Truslove's boots, and having polished them with extreme care until the toecaps shone like polished gilt, and remembering that Mr. Truslove was an early riser, he decided to carry Mr. Truslove's boots upstairs and deposit them outside his door.

He was in the act of placing them on the mat when Mr. Truslove's door opened, and Mr. Truslove, in dressing-gown and nightshirt, and with a rather tousled head, surprised James Slade.

"Your boots, sir."

"Ha—boots," said Mr. Truslove.

"Shall I carry them in, sir?"

"No, give 'em to me."

Mr. Truslove was looking curiously at the new manservant. Then he glanced at the boots, holding them up to the light.

"I hope they are satisfactory, sir?"

"Quite. Let's see, what's your name?"

"Slade, sir."

"You might run down and get my shaving water, Slade."

"Certainly, sir."

"I feel like getting out early."

Mr. Slade went down for the shaving water, and Mr. Truslove, having put the boots on the floor, looked at himself in the mirror, and caressed a stubbly chin. Now, what was there funny about the fellow? His voice, his language, the cut of his jib? Decent, respectable sort of old chap, but somehow more than that. Might be a fellow who had come down in the world;

might be younger than he looked. Mr. Truslove was in the act of getting into his trousers when the knock came at the door.

"Your water, sir."

"Bring it in, Slade. That's right, stand it in the basin. Been in service before, I take it?"

"Yes, sir. Anything else I can do for you, sir?"

"Not at the moment. Thank you, Slade. I'm rather glad there's a man about the place. Can you press trousers?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll look 'em out later, and lay 'em on a chair."

Mr. Slade hurried away to complete his business of the boots, and Mr. Truslove, lathering his chin, supposed that Slade had been in good service, and was accustomed to waiting upon gentlemen, and so had picked up the graces of a gentleman's gentleman. Yes, perhaps that explained it. Mrs. Pomeroy was not the sort of woman to buy a pig in a poke.

The last pair of boots had been dealt with when Mr. Slade heard Florrie calling him. It was half-past seven, and the staff breakfast was ready in the kitchen. Mr. Slade removed his apron and put on his jacket, and in doing so he was wiser than he knew, for Mrs. Eliza ruled in the kitchen, and liked things just so. Mr. Slade bade Mrs. Eliza good morning, addressing her as Mrs. Cotgrove, and Eliza returned the compliment by addressing him as Mr. Slade.

"There's your chair, Mr. Slade. You can take the other end of the table."

Mr. Slade, feeling himself in a friendly atmosphere, took what was to be his appointed place, though, before many weeks had passed, his end was to become the head of the table, Mrs. Eliza relinquishing her supreme authority to a man who was to become known as Dad. Mrs. Cotgrove poured out tea, and the bacon or the sausages were served according to seniority. Yet, on this morning, Mr. Slade found the dish passed to him first.

"After you, ma'am," said he to Mrs. Cotgrove.

"You help yourself, Mr. Slade," said she.

Mr. Slade helped himself, but not greedily so, and remarked that it was a lovely morning. Mrs. Cotgrove accepted this piece of information as news, she not having put her head outside her kitchen. Eliza sugared the other cups, but as a special favour the sugar-bowl was sent to Mr. Slade. He took one lump, and his restraint did not pass unnoticed. Sugar was precious, for Mrs. P. handed it out daily from the store-cupboard, just as though she was doling out pieces of gold. Meanwhile, Mr. Slade was thinking that the elderly woman with the fierce black eyebrows must be less formidable than she seemed, if a child ran downstairs to get into bed with her, sweets or no sweets.

Mr. Slade, feeling it his duty to make conversation, asked whether it would be possible for him to be supplied with a hot iron some time during the day. Mr. Truslove's trousers needed pressing.

"You come to me for it," said Mrs. Eliza.

"Thank you, ma'am. I don't want to interfere in any way."

"No trouble, I'm sure."

Mr. Slade smiled and looked shyly up and down the table.

"May I say that I feel among friends. If it hadn't been for Miss Florence——"

Florrie winked at him.

"Did you get 'em all right?"

"I sincerely hope so."

"What's them?" asked Mrs. Cotgrove.

"Boots, ma'am. I got muddled up with the boots."

May giggled and was looked at severely by Eliza.

"Nothing to snigger at, young woman. I'm sure it was most natural-like for Mr. Slade to—be—a bit puzzled——"

"I wasn't sniggerin'," said May.

"Oh, yes, you were."

"I mean—not at Mr. Slade. I wouldn't like to clean old Sawkins's boots. He don't change 'is socks more than——"

"Don't be vulgar, my girl," said Mrs. Cotgrove.

2

In a recess in Mrs. Pomeroy's private room and office stood her safe. Perched upon a stout oak stool, and draped with a kind of altar-cloth of red velvet, it did not look like a safe, but few things in the Caroline Hotel looked like what man and nature had intended them to be. The ladies wore bustles, Mrs. Pomeroy a very pronounced one, a strange fashion at a period when no physical bulge or curve below the neck was recognized in polite society. Everything was draped, the mirror, the mantel-piece, the tables; it was an age of valences, antimacassars, bric-a-brac, ormolu. Moreover, if an article of furniture could not be draped, it might be painted. Coal-boxes had their lids decorated with bouquets of roses; bullrushes and water-flags were painted upon mirrors. Pampas grass speared out of tall vases. Artifice was more than artifice. It was an abomination and a curse to those who had to dust it.

Mrs. Pomeroy turned back her red velvet altar-cloth, and unlocked her safe. It was—in fact—her holy of holies. With strong, plump, deliberate hands she withdrew from the safe a small black deed-box and a cash-box. She placed them upon the centre table almost with the solemnity of a priest placing the sacrificial emblems on the altar. Then, she rang the bell.

Bells were to prove one of the most prevalent problems in James Slade's new world. A whole row of them hung in the passage outside his pantry. Each bell had a letter or a number painted in white upon it, D. for dining-room, P. for parlour or drawing-room, O. for office, No. 1 for Mr. Truslove. You might hear a bell ring, but by the time you had bolted into the passage its metallic voice might have died away. You had to spot the still-vibrating bell, and so identify it. Moreover, it was an age when everyone rang bells on the slightest provocation, if coal was needed on the fire, if a book had been mislaid, even if some old lady had dropped her knitting.

Mr. Slade was cleaning the silver when he heard that particular bell. It might not be his business to answer it but he had been warned of the sanctity of bells, and of the immediate response that was to be expected. Also, the swiftness of the response might depend upon the eminence of the particular bell which called for service. No. 1 was to be answered instantly. No. 19 might be dallied with, even ignored.

Mr. Slade, a tablespoon in one hand, a leather in the other, hurried out to identify the claimant. O was still in a state of motion. Mr. Slade's mouth rounded itself to an expressive O!—Oh—Clara! Was that for him? If so, he had been expecting it.

Putting spoon and leather aside, he slipped into his jacket, and feeling a little breathless, climbed the stairs.

Mr. Slade knocked at Mrs. Pomeroy's door.

"Yes, madam?"

The door was opened by Mrs. Pomeroy herself. She did not utter a word, but waved him in with an imperious sweep of the hand, and then closed the door upon him. Mr. Slade stood meekly on the hearthrug, and memory stood with him upon just some other day. Mrs. Pomeroy had turned the key. She walked to the table, opened the cashbox, took out two sovereigns and laid them on the table.

"Boots and an alpaca jacket. Chignell's in the High Street for the jacket."

Almost it was like a game of Dumb Crambo, a silent show, and had anybody been eavesdropping they would have been none the wiser. Mrs. P. opened the deed box, removed a package from it, and replaced it on the table. It was tied with red tape, and under the tape lay a photograph, a very revealing picture. Mrs. Pomeroy waved a hand over the exhibit. The gesture said—"It is all there, the complete dossier. You will do well to remember it." Mr. Slade smiled a little wincing smile, and nodded.

"Yes, madam."

Mrs. Pomeroy turned and took a sheet of paper from her

desk. She handed it to James Slade and her eyes said—"Read, mark, and inwardly digest."

Mr. Slade read what she had written.

"You will not speak to the child.

I claim restitution in full.

You will consider it generous of me to give you a home, and an opportunity to reform yourself."

Mr. Slade's hand trembled slightly as he held the paper.

"I quite understand, madam, but——"

"There are no buts, Slade."

She took the paper from him, and returned it to her desk, to be converted later into ash. James Slade moistened his lips. He had something to say.

"About wages, madam? You see—I——"

"That will depend upon the satisfaction you give. I will allow you to retain tips."

"Thank you, madam."

She pointed to the two sovereigns.

"Go out and buy boots and a jacket. If there is any money left over I will allow you to keep it. You will help Florence to-day in the dining-room. Watch what she does and educate yourself. That is all."

"Thank you, madam."

She unlocked the door, and as he passed out she spoke to him in a voice of authority.

"Those will be your duties, Slade. Are you quite clear about them?"

"Yes, madam."

3

Mr. Slade went shopping, but even while Mr. Chignell was trying coats on him, James Slade was repeating to himself those fatal and unforgiving words, "You will not speak to the child." Was she indeed his child? Or had Clara been guilty of some indiscretion? So far as he could remember there had been no——

But, tut-tut, did dates and calculations matter? Even if Clara had in the desperate crisis he had imposed upon her, accepted more than sympathy from some other man, could he blame her? Yet, what an impossible condition was this! Was he to smile at the child, and be mute, and to refuse to answer her if she spoke to him? Clara had become too much the Queen Elizabeth, a woman whom her own servants regarded as an enemy. How many lies must have been fobbed off on good Queen Bess! Mr. Chignell, meanwhile, was running his hands over Mr. Slade's collar and shoulders.

"That's much better, sir. Quite a nice fit. Please look in the glass, sir."

Mr. Slade glanced in the mirror, and saw his own poor sorrowful face and narrow shoulders. He thought that he looked a meagre little man, not the man who should have——

"Yes, that seems to fit me. How much?"

"Seventeen and six, sir. A very cheap coat."

"I'll take it."

"Anything else to-day, sir?"

"No, thank you."

Mr. Chignell wrapped up the coat and made cheerful conversation. Was Mr. Slade a visitor or a new resident? Ah, a resident. Good. Mr. Chignell handed over the parcel and the change, and hoped that he would see Mr. Slade again. He opened the door for him.

"Good day, sir, and thank you."

Mr. Slade went in search of boots. He was rather sensitive about his socks. He suspected a hole over the right big toe, and was ready to apologize for it, but no hole was there, and Mr. Slade felt easier. He saved seven and sixpence on the boots, and found himself in the High Street with ten shillings in hand. Could he dare to buy a couple of new collars and a tie? And he possessed only two handkerchiefs. One would be in the wash, and the other in action. But if he had a cold? He did so dare, and felt quite a desperate devil, an absolute pirate. Rather nice

to be able to shop like this. He would like to have bought Rose a box of chocolates, but such devilry would be much too desperate. Besides a few shillings in hand might be regarded as absolutely necessary. He returned to Caroline Terrace richer by four shillings, seven pence, three farthings. It was with satisfaction and mild pride that he hung up his new jacket, and put his collar and ties away, also four handkerchiefs. Almost he felt opulent. Thank Heaven it was summer and he would not need an overcoat as yet. If tips accumulated he might be able to afford an overcoat before the winter without having to play the suppliant to Clara.

4

Dinner proved something of a disaster for poor J. S. He felt like a young actor none too sure of his part and taking the stage for the first time. Everybody seemed to be looking at him, which, of course, was not so. The meal began with soup, pea soup, and Mrs. Pomeroy had given orders that it was to be served from the sideboard. Mr. Slade grabbed the ladle and gave Florence a look of appeal.

"You take the plates round."

Florence humoured him. Why did poor old Dad look so scared? What was there to be afraid of? So, Mr. Slade ladled out the soup, and Florence, with a plate in each hand, did the serving. The second course was roast-beef, Yorkshire pudding and vegetables, and again Mr. Slade funk'd the crisis. He had not carved a joint for many years, and he handed the tools to Florrie. A meat plate was not a soup plate, and Mr. Slade thought that he could cope with meat plates.

He had forgotten the gravy. Gravy was supplied from the sideboard, the plates distributed, and then the vegetable dishes went round. Maybe, Florence was too lavish with the gravy, and Miss Goodbody indulged in one of her nervous wriggles just as Mr. Slade was presenting Mr. Sawkins with his plate.

The jerk of Miss Goodbody's elbow sent the gravy over the tablecloth and also over Mr. Sawkins's sleeve.

James Slade was stricken with horror.

"I do apologize, sir. I am most grievously sorry."

Mr. Sawkins was angrily dabbing his sleeve with his serviette. Mrs. Pomeroy was looking knives and pistols at James Slade. But Miss Goodbody saved the situation, and Mr. Slade never forgot her twittering intervention. Miss Goodbody might fuss in the future, but he forgave her.

"It really was my fault. I'm afraid I nudged—his—arm."

Mr. Truslove, who had been observing poor James's stricken face, confirmed the diagnosis.

"Yes, I'm afraid you did, Miss G. Pure accident, pure accident."

Mr. Sawkins was still dabbing irritably at his sleeve.

"Too much gravy on the plate."

Mr. Slade spoke soothingly to Mr. Sawkins over Mr. Sawkins's shoulder.

"If you will let me have your coat, sir, after dinner, I'll have it cleaned for you."

Mr. Sawkins was not gracious.

"Yes, you'd better."

VI

I

MR. SLADE endured.

He became an expert polisher of boots and silver, and ceased to fumble with the plates. He kept the little garden tidy, and was becoming a familiar figure to the various dwellers in the terrace, and in turn was recognized as a familiar figure by them. Mr. Golightly, in frock coat and top-hat would go

striding lightly to business at eight fifty-five each morning; he was the town's chief mercer, haberdasher and provider of millinery. Mr. Grigson passed at nine-thirty, like a dignified and animated lamp-post wearing a hard felt hat. Dr. Richmond's dog-cart called for him punctually at nine. The Rev. Mr. Chatterway would wander out at any sort of hour, very much at his leisure, and ready to gossip with all and sundry, and to take life with a pinch of snuff. He might pause and cock an eye at Mr. Slade bent double and snipping at the grass verges with a pair of shears.

"Slow business, that."

"Yes, sir."

"Seen you in church, haven't I?"

"Yes, sir, on Sunday evenings."

Little Charlie Richmond would come scudding along the railings, to linger by the hotel doorway, his sailor hat like a yellow halo, his legs the colour of a good brown egg. His loitering here was an affair of sentiment. He might use Mr. Slade as a conversation piece while hoping that Rose might come down to play in Caroline Gardens.

Rose was James Slade's most painful problem.

How was he to deal with the child when she came and hung over the railings and smiled at him? Just smile back? Yes, with Clara up above there, ready to pounce. Mr. Slade was driven to strange prevarications. He could pretend to be deaf, and he did so pretend, tapping an ear with a bent forefinger.

"I'm afraid I'm very deaf, my dear. I can't hear what you say."

But how hateful to have to lie to a child!

Moreover, he could hear very well in the dining-room when someone asked for more bread, or Mrs. Pomeroy gave him an order, and the deception was so poor and thin a garment, and more afflicting than any hair shirt. It was not reasonable of Clara to demand an abstinence that was both inhuman and impracticable. He would appeal to Clara. He would promise that if she

allowed him to speak to the child he would never attempt to cultivate even an old man's friendliness.

Also, had he not given himself away to Charlie Richmond? They had discussed ships and flowers and toy soldiers, and Dr. Richmond's new dog-cart over the railings. How was he to know that the two children were to argue about his deafness, and were to stage an ambushade that would prove his undoing?

Mr. Truslove was on his balcony, and down below Mr. Slade was snipping off dead geranium blossoms. Mrs. Pomeroy, too, happened to be at her window. Mr. Truslove saw two small figures come crouching along under the shelter of the clipped euonymus hedge which grew inside the railings. Suddenly Charlie Richmond's sailor hat bobbed up above the hedgetop.

"Hullo, Mr. Slade."

James Slade was taken unawares. He turned and smiled upon the boy.

"Hullo, Master Charles."

"What are you doing?"

"Cutting off dead flowers, my dear."

Holding to the spikes of the railings Charles bobbed up and down.

"You're not deaf. I said you weren't. I've won my penny, Rose."

To Mr. Slade's consternation Rose's straw hat and solemn face appeared beside the boy's.

"No you haven't yet. You shouted. You are deaf, aren't you, Mr. Slade?"

James Slade frowned, and put a hand to his ear.

"What did you say, my dear?"

"You are deaf, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course. I mean, sometimes I——"

"He isn't deaf," said Charles. "He's just pretending."

"What did you say, Master Charles?"

"You heard me when I asked you what you were doing."

Mr. Slade shook his head as though puzzled.

"No, I saw you——"

"Liar," said the boy's eyes, but he was too nice a child to blurt out the accusation.

"You owe me a penny, Charlie."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

Mr. Truslove had been feeling in a trousers pocket. He found two pennies and tossed them down.

"Now, now, never contradict a lady, young man. There's a penny for each of you."

Mr. Slade so far forgot himself as to glance up at the balcony and give Mr. Truslove a grateful smile, and Mr. Truslove nodded at him. Queer old fish—this! Why the devil was he pretending to be deaf when he was no more deaf than Adam?

Mr. Truslove had travelled, and in so doing had shed much of the dreadful complacency of the English, especially of the English working-man. Ignorant, awkward brutes many of them, too stubborn and stupid to learn, but ready to grumble and grudge ability its special favour. Now, according to Mr. Truslove's experience, old Slade was not plain English. He was too sensitive, too suggestive, too much the gentleman, and Mr. Truslove remained upon the balcony, meditating upon this peculiar incident. He was still there when Mrs. Pomeroy rang her bell, and sent Florrie, who answered it, for James Slade. Maybe, Mrs. Pomeroy forgot, in a state of irritation, her open window, and Mr. Truslove did hear certain strange things that were infinitely revealing.

"I could not help it, Clara——"

"Don't call me that, you fool."

"No, madam. But I do suggest that you are demanding something—that isn't—human."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I can't go on pretending like this. I must speak to the child, if I only speak to her as your servant."

There was silence for a second or two, and then Mrs. Pomeroy's voice took up the argument.

"Very well, Slade, you may speak to her—if she speaks to you. As my servant. But, remember——"

"I shall not forget."

"You had better not forget. You understand my reasons, I presume?"

"Yes, madam, I understand them."

Then there was silence, and Mr. Truslove withdrew from the balcony. Funny business, this! But he was not going to blurt it abroad. Life had taught Mr. Truslove to keep his mouth shut. Moreover, a human problem could be more interesting if you reserved the studying and the deciphering of it for yourself.

Mr. Slade, while engaged upon some of his outdoor activities such as tending the gardens, cleaning windows or polishing knockers, letter-plates and door-handles, had observed the passing of a particular person, nor would it have been possible for him not to look at Dr. Richmond's wife as devotedly and closely as he dared. That in him, which in his narrow world had begun to look through the bars at beauty and to give thanks for it, could gaze with gladness upon Charlie's mother. Mr. Slade might say to himself, "There goes a lovely face and a lovely nature," knowing while he said it that there are beauties of the spirit and of the flesh. Mrs. Richmond, the beloved wife of the beloved physician, walking into the town to do her shopping, was to James Slade something for which man could be thankful.

Polishing his silver until he could see a vague and distorted likeness of himself in a spoon he could confront that other finality. Because of the child how utterly and completely Clara had him in her power. There was a cunning in Clara that emphasized his own helplessness. He was one of those honourable fools, and she knew it. Even his failure and his disaster had been due to too sensitive an urge to stave off a crisis. How strange that a woman should be so vindictive, and determined

upon her pound of flesh! Well, he would never be able to tell the child. And Clara, when she had kept silence about it, must have known how utterly she had him under her thumb. Poor lonely old fool! Well, when you were feeling so much alone it was good to do things and to do them to the limit of your power. Even God might be with you while you consoled your soul by cleaning the silver.

"Good morning," said the voice.

Heavy rain in the night had dashed some of the flowers, and James Slade was rescuing them with bits of stick and loops of bass. He had bought these things himself. Startled, he came erect, and found himself looking into that serene and lovely face.

"Oh, good morning, madam."

"I am afraid that rain was rather cruel."

"Yes, madam, it was."

"My poor petunias have their faces in the dirt. And lobelia doesn't like rain."

"No, madam. If one gives it a brush with one's hand it cheers up."

"You must be very fond of flowers."

"Yes, I am, madam. You see, they can't hurt one."

She was looking at him with a peculiar and sympathetic steadfastness that James Slade found disconcerting. He ought not to have blurted out a pitiful thing like that.

"And they can be so gay."

She smiled at him.

"And they don't chatter, say silly things."

Mr. Slade smiled back at her, his fingers twisting at a piece of bass.

"I could not fancy them saying silly things to you, madam."

He stood gazing after her as she passed upon her way. If only Clara had been——! And then he remembered those eternal and watching windows, and how she seemed to love to

catch him out, especially so before her guests. "Slade, that fork is dirty. Egg. Quite disgusting." So, he bent again to his work, and was busy with his bass and his little sticks when Mrs. Pomeroy and the child appeared together in the doorway.

"Slade."

"Yes, madam."

"Find some real work. I won't have you wasting your time like that."

"Yes, madam."

How mean of her to make him feel so poor and inferior under the eyes of the child! Her passion for humiliating him was super-human. He gathered together his bits of stick and bass and turned towards the gate, avoiding the eyes of the child. He heard Rose say, "Why are you cross with him, mother?" Mrs. Pomeroy's bustle wagged contemptuously as she walked. "I am not cross with him. One should never be cross with one's inferiors."

2

At lunch that day Mrs. Richmond asked her husband a question.

"Have you noticed Mrs. Pomeroy's—porter?"

Dr. Richmond came out of meditative immersion in a case that was puzzling him.

"Old Slade?"

"Is that his name?"

"Yes. He valets Truslove. A mute old creature."

Said Mrs. Richmond, "He has the face of a saint. I wonder——"

Her husband smiled at her.

"You are always discovering strange virtues—in strange places."

"Am I, John? I'm not conscious of——"

"Well, you make people look saints——"

Charles, home for the summer holidays, and rollicking in

plum tart and custard, had something to say upon the saintliness of James Slade.

"He tells lies."

"How do you know that, my son?"

"He pretends to be deaf, and he isn't. I caught him out."

"Are you sure he didn't catch you out, Master Clever?"

"He—couldn't catch—me—out."

His mother gently snubbed him.

"Little boys don't know everything."

"Very true," said his father. "Since you got that move from the Upper First you have been growing a little too cocky."

3

On Sunday evenings Mr. James Slade attended at St. John's Church, and there could survey all the people who mattered and all those who did not matter. St. John's Church was a rambling old building, pleasantly irregular, and built before those dreadful products of the Gothic revival. It was individual, just as the new incumbent—Mr. Chatterway—was individual. James Slade soon grew to love it, the walk along the path between the hollies while the bell sang "God, God, God," the slipping into a back pew near the door, Mr. Bellinger at the organ, old Robinson's white head in the choir. He felt at peace here. He was a person, a person kneeling before God.

From his corner seat in an obscure pew near the door he could observe and study all the hierarchies of Southfleet. There were square, oaken pews with doors, newer deal benches without them. The elect gathered in the more protected pews, the private sittings, the humbler folk in the public ones. First came the gentry, such as the Gages, the Rawdons, the Hallards. Next in order were the professional gentlemen, such as the Richmonds and the Grigsons, and those citizens and their families who had retired to Southfleet and become privileged residents. Mr. Blossom the brewer was included in this group. Trade followed after, Mr. Golightly, Mr. Chignell, Mr. Murrell, Mr. Frost, the

principal butcher. Mrs. Pomeroy had been admitted to a private pew which could claim attachment to the professional group. She was almost a gentlewoman, and becoming more so, and a step removed from mere commerce. She looked distinguished in her black or purple velvets and her handsome bonnets. She sang in a deep contralto, confidently and with emphasis. Rose sat beside her, and to James Slade the child's hat was like a flower, shining in some rather dim garden. He loved the hymns, especially "Rock of Ages", and "Abide with Me", and sang them in a gentle and slightly apologetic tenor. He even liked Mr. Chatterway's jerky and conversational sermons, and the queer way he threw his arms about and would bend and peer impressively at his congregation. Sometimes he would wag an admonitory first finger. Mr. Chatterway could be quite an original in the pulpit.

When the last Amen had sounded, and the congregation rustled to its feet, Mr. Slade would stand erect while Mr. Bellinger played the congregation out. Mr. Slade, as one of its most obscure members, waited respectfully for the gentry to pass down the central aisle, and out under the gallery with its Royal Arms in red and blue, and white and gold. Mrs. Pomeroy would walk down the aisle, head up, eyes front, holding her daughter by the hand. She never so much as glanced at James Slade, but she knew that he was there.

4

The children of St. John's Sunday School sat in the gallery with their teachers, and when the organ had ceased to play the children would come clattering down the gallery stairs, and out into the evening sunlight. Mr. Slade would walk out with a nod to Mr. Munday the verger, and join the crowd of children, who, released from the solemnity of the service, became like a flight of chirruping sparrows. Inevitably, James Slade was drawn towards children, having become something of a child himself. To a man who was labelled "Failure" these young things seemed

to symbolize a beginning over again, spring, eggs in a nest, primroses, fairy stories. He understood their mischief and their naughtinesses, their little woes, their tears, their tantrums. He too was beginning over again, and in the world of children he felt at ease. He would like to have given them toys and sweets, but he had nothing to give but smiles, yet his smiles seemed to be sufficient. Often he would walk between the glistening holly hedges towards the setting sun holding two young things by the hand. He could talk child's talk without self-consciousness or affectation, and his small friends would look up at him and ask him simple questions.

"Mr. Slade, what—is—a harlot?"

This from a small girl, and Mr. Slade, somehow without embarrassment, would propound some sort of answer.

"A pretty lady, my dear, who is pleasant to the gentlemen."

"Like—like Mrs. Else—or——?"

"No, my dear, not quite like that. I don't think we have any such ladies here."

Yet, loving children as he did, as his Lord Jesus loved them, it was all the more tantalizing to James Slade to have to watch the particular child growing up like a tree in someone else's garden. He might look over the wall, but only surreptitiously so. That which was so humanly his could never be his, as he might dream of and desire it. To Rose he was just Old Slade, an odd man about the place whom her mother scolded, and to whom she herself might in the future issue orders. For those were days when James Slade seemed to avoid the child, smile at her in a queer and poignant way, and slip away round corners. Maybe she thought him a funny, silent old man, and perhaps, for that very reason, the illusive shadowiness of him attracted her. She was still young enough to dash down the kitchen stairs to escape from the austere atmosphere of alert respectability.

There came a day when James Slade discovered that the child had a temper, and a wilfulness that rebelled against her world's "Thou shalt not". James Slade happened to be polishing the

brass stair-rods, kneeling on the stairs and removing the rods one by one when he heard footsteps in the passage. Rose came up and past him, brushing by with an air of guilty haste. She had something in her hand, a bag of sweets. She had been out with Mrs. Else, and a certain person was jealous of that lady. How puzzling such emotional prejudices must be to a child! James Slade, holding a stair-rod in both hands like a Galahad's sword, watched her legs disappearing. She was creeping up now, step by step, to slip past the maternal door. Mr. Slade had seen the bag of sweets, the gift of that other woman of whom Rose's mother jealously disapproved. A small hand clutching a bag! "That which I hold I keep." It was the maternal motto. Like mother—like child?

But Rose was out of luck. That bag was not to be smuggled into the little back room that was hers. Maybe her mother had been watching from the window, and had waited, her firm fingers on the door handle. It opened upon Rose like the door of some jealous Jehovah.

"Where have you been?"

"Only in the gardens."

"That is not true. How dare you lie to me? What is that you are hiding?"

There seemed to be a resentful silence on the part of Rose.

"What have you got there——?"

"Only—a——"

"Give it to me at once."

"I won't."

"You won't! How dare you——"

There was the sound of a scuffle.

"Sweets! I thought so. Haven't I told you——?"

"Don't, mother, they're mine. Why shouldn't Mrs. Else give me——"

"Give me that bag."

"I won't. They're mine."

Seemingly there was a struggle for the bag, and in the struggle

the paper burst, and the confectionery was scattered on the carpet. Also, Mr. Slade heard a sound that suggested a crisp smack upon soft flesh.

"Now, pick them up, pick them all up."

"I won't."

"You will."

Sudden tears and angry, rebellious sobbings. The child came running down the stairs, her mother following. James Slade was kneeling there, head bowed, and leaning upon the stair-rod as upon a sword.

"Slade, stop the child."

James Slade did not move. He let her go past him, weeping bitterly and noisily, down the stairs and to the door. Mrs. Pomeroy was in pursuit, and suddenly James Slade held the rod crosswise against her, his face stricken but determined.

"No, madam."

The door was open and the child gone, to hide herself somewhere in the gardens.

"How dare you? Get out of my way."

"Please, madam."

Her hand swept out. Her impulse was to strike him, but suddenly she grew rigid, nostrils pinched, lips thin and bloodless.

"Very well. Go up and clear up—that mess, Slade."

"Yes, madam."

"You can collect them in a coal-shovel, and put them on the kitchen fire."

James Slade obeyed her. She stood over him relentlessly while he picked up the sweets. She seemed to tower like Retribution over the figure of the kneeling sinner.

"Now, go and put them on the fire."

"Yes, madam."

"And come back and tell me that you have done it."

VII

I

SO, the child had a spirit and a temper of her own, but, unlike her mother, she could lose her temper passionately and with tears. Well, thank God for that! James Slade had never known Mrs. Pomeroy to weep. Sorry for herself she might have been, but with a cold and acid indignation that seemed to eat into life, without consuming it. The affront to her pride and her prejudices had been so dastardly that she seemed to be incapable of forgetting or forgiving.

"To persecute me seems to be her pleasure," thought the cleaner of stair-roads.

And having collected those scattered sweets and carried them downstairs, he was torn by a swift temptation. He wanted to go out into Caroline Gardens and find the child, take her on his knees and comfort her. But would not such intervention be disastrous, and expose both the child and himself to other indignation?

Arriving in the kitchen with that coal-scoop, and looking ashamed of it, he found Eliza, and Floe and May in conclave. Florence had overheard the fracas above, and darting up the area steps had seen Rose racing for the shrubbery.

"What's that, Dad?"

"Sweets," said Mr. Slade, looking apologetic.

"What's the idea?"

"I have orders to burn them."

Eliza made a clucking noise rather like an indignant hen.

"Well, I—never! Why shouldn't she have a few goodies?"

"Sweets seem to be forbidden."

"Because Mrs. Else gave 'em to her, I suppose. Petty, I call it. She's going the wrong way about it with that child."

Mr. Slade stood shame-faced holding the coal-scoop. Surely these women must despise him? He—a man——!

"You give me that coal-shovel, Dad," said Eliza.

Mr. Slade looked at her piteously.

"I have to tell—her—I've burned them."

"Well, go and tell her. She's asking for lies persecuting the child like that. I'll keep the sweets for her."

Mr. Slade surrendered the shovel to Eliza.

"I don't like telling lies, Eliza."

"No, I know you don't, Dad, but you can put it down to me."

"I wish," said Mr. Slade, and hesitated.

"Yes, Dad?"

"I wish someone could go out and find the child, and comfort her."

Florence volunteered.

"I will. I'll just shove on a hat and coat. I don't care tuppence about her temper. I'm marryin' Joe after Christmas, so what do I care?"

"Thank you, Florence," said Mr. Slade.

Florence was as good as her word, nor was her short absence from duty noticed by Mrs. Pomeroy. Mr. Slade, reclimbing the stairs with the empty coal-scoop and moistening dry lips in preparation for that verbal inexactitude, met Mr. Truslove on the landing. Mr. Truslove had heard all that had passed between mother and child, and poor old Pinch-Me. Also, he had seen Rose in flight for the gardens, and Mr. Truslove had put on his hat, and was bent for the gardens. He gave one glance at poor Slade's suffering face, and at the humiliation that seemed to express itself even in the droop of the coal-scoop.

"Well, James; lovely day. I've got another pair of trousers for you."

"Yes, sir."

"Best creaser of trousers, James, I know. Conscientious fellow."

"Thank you, sir."

"Did my medicine come?"

"I put it in your room, sir."

"I must be getting blind. You would do. Don't know what I should do without you, James."

"You're always very welcome, sir."

Mr. Truslove gave a pat to his hat, and went jauntily down the stairs. His voice had been clear and emphatic. That damned virago might just as well know that No. 1 regarded James Slade as a person of value. A most peculiar and provoking situation this! When a woman like Clara Pomeroy nursed a grievance it seemed to become like a poisonous snake. Mr. Truslove went forth in search of the child. He would bring her a pound of sweets, and make the present public, and Mrs. P. could swallow her temper, and be damned to her. Meanwhile, Mr. Slade knocked at his mistress's door.

"The coal-scoop, madam."

"You can bring it in, Slade."

James carried it in, and slipped it into place at the back of the coal-box.

"Have you carried out my orders?"

"Yes, madam."

"That was Mr. Truslove, I think."

"It was, madam. Just going out."

"I should like to suggest, Slade, that you are apt to be too familiar with the visitors."

"I'm sorry, madam, but when a gentleman speaks to me——"

"Don't argue, Slade. Go and finish cleaning the stair-rods."

2

Life may be more simple or more subtle than it seems, its complexity taking its texture from the emotional fabric of the play; but when the actors are simple souls and happily or unhappily unconscious of the sinister motives the psychologists might ascribe to them, the simplest happenings may possess purpose and significance.

Mrs. Pomeroy had presented separate tables to the elect.

The first floor was promoted to them.

The second floor might be allowed them, provided that the occupants were pleasing to the lady.

The third floor still fed at a communal table placed in the most busy and draughty part of the room, and parallel to the sideboard.

Mr. Truslove had his table in a corner by the third window, away from all draughts, and with an oblique view of the gardens and the sea. Miss Popham mealed in the opposite corner as far from Mr. Truslove as was possible. Mr. Slade had staged this setting with politeness and tact.

"I have reserved this nice table in the corner, Miss, for you."

Miss Popham, simple soul, was flattered.

"Oh, thank you, Slade. How very nice."

Mr. Truslove had winked at James, and expressed his appreciation of such diplomacy.

"Thanks, Jimmy. Peace, perfect peace. A woman's tongue can give you indigestion."

Mr. Truslove was not the man he had been, and a medicine bottle decorated his table, though there were occasions when he had to be reminded of the presence of that bottle.

"Have you taken your medicine, sir?"

"Damn it, James, what a man you are! Must I?"

"Doctor's orders, sir."

Moreover, Mr. Truslove's appetite had suffered. He had to be coaxed and considered.

"What is there this morning, James?"

"I would recommend for you, sir, a lightly boiled egg."

"Damn your eggs! Aren't there sausages?"

"Yes, sir, but——"

"All right, egg, James. You're a regular tyrant."

"Oh, no, sir. I want you to have what's best for you."

Strange that these separate tables should have emphasized

James Slade as a person, but it was so. Each table was individual, and in treating it as such Mr. Slade became more and more the individual, not only to the occupant, but to himself. This was personal service, especially so to a person like Mr. Truslove, who, once a month, would slip a sovereign into Mr. Slade's palm.

"Very good of you, sir. It isn't really necessary."

"Fudge, James. I like it."

"If I may say so, sir, it is a pleasure to serve you."

"Thank you, James. And sometimes it is a pleasure to be served."

To James Slade himself the change may have been scarcely perceptible. His peculiar sense of humility continued. He was one of the world's failures, and with gentle sincerity he could chant in church, "O Lord have mercy upon us, miserable sinners." Doubtless had anybody spoken of him in his hearing as "That good old man", he would not have taken the judgment as personal. James Slade was finding his little world a kind and helpful place, just because he was what he was, and discovered his own reflection in it without recognizing the portrait. To Mr. Truslove he was Jimmy, to the kitchen Dad, or, on more formal occasions Mr. Slade. To Mrs. Pomeroy the other members of the staff referred to him always as Mr. Slade. This formalism may have amazed her without her recognizing its esoteric significance. Clara was James Slade's cross, and he accepted her as such. He saw her as a much wronged woman, hard and inexorable, but justified in placing this penance upon him. There may be all the difference in the world between respect and respectability. James Slade was wearing for himself a garment of respect, Mrs. Pomeroy investing herself in the robes of respectability.

There remained the child, that human problem, that surprising heritage from the past.

Sometimes James Slade would sit upon his bed and wonder. What would Rose's future be? Had Clara any plans for the

blossom time of the rose? Would Rose grow up to be a little genteel snob, a thing of corsetted unreality, for, in meditating upon Rose James Slade was more than Simple Simon. Some of the cunning of the serpent was his. Here was this incipient Eve who promised to possess the fatal gift of beauty, growing up in the ice-house of her mother's jealous and possessive power. Rose was going to school now, attending daily at Miss Hotham's establishment for young gentlewomen. Her skirts were lengthening, her pose was more sedate; she practised upon the piano. She had ceased from scampering downstairs into the kitchen. Eliza might have said, "Our young lady's growing airs and graces." Mr. Slade cleaned Miss Rose's boots, high boots with buttons, and did it lovingly. Sometimes he counted the buttons like a nun telling her rosary.

"May you have a happy year for every one, my sweet."

The kitchen asked his advice and treated him as a Father Confessor, but not in the kitchen.

Eliza had money in the Post Office Savings Bank. Should she leave it there, or place it elsewhere? Mr. Slade, with painful memories upon him, advised her to let good money sleep where it was.

Florence was bothered about Joe. He had been a little remiss in his wooing, and had missed two of her evenings off.

"What d'you think I ought to do about it, Dad? Eliza—she says—I shouldn't cheapen myself, and that I might even walk out with another chap. Tom, the baker's man, has been at me."

"Has Joe given any reasons?"

"No, 'e's just funny."

"There may be other reasons for Joe's funniness, my dear."

"But why should he go and——?"

"Next time Joe calls for you go out and be sweet to him—just as usual."

"Coo, but shouldn't I look cheap?"

"Not if Joe is worth while."

Joe was worth while. Florrie, having gone out with him, came back with a radiant face, and kissed Mr. Slade.

"You were right, Dad. Poor Joe, 'e was afraid of losing 'is job and was shy of tellin' me. You see, we were to be married soon."

"And what did you say to Joe, my dear?"

"Oh, that I'd stick by 'im, and 'e wasn't to keep 'is troubles to 'isself. I'd share 'em."

"Good girl. Joe's a lucky man."

"And you're an old dear, Dad."

May had a mother sick in the old town, and was wanting to go and do bits of things for her, but Mrs. P. was not helpful.

"I feel like walkin' out of the 'ouse I do. I says to 'er I want to be away more than an hour, and she says to me, she says, 'I don't pay girls to go trapesing about. Are you sure your mother's ill?' 'Call me a liar, ma'am' says I. 'You can go and see for yourself,' I says, but I didn't get no change out of 'er."

"Well, I'd go, May; and say nothing about it."

"Oo-er, but what if she——?"

"You're a good girl at your work, May, and I don't suppose she wants to lose you. I dare say we can give Eliza a little help if she wants it. I'd go and see your mother if I were you."

May went, and nothing disastrous happened, for Mr. Slade spoke to Mr. Truslove about it, and Mr. Truslove brought up the subject in public conversation. What a lucky thing it was that the girl was so near her mother, and how considerate it was of Mrs. Pomeroy to let her off for an hour or two. He complimented Mrs. P. upon her kindness, and though Mrs. Pomeroy may have been a little puzzled, she did not descend upon the daughter. There are various ways of putting awkward and contumacious people in the wrong.

Miss Hotham's school walked out each afternoon in caterpillar formation, sometimes taking the road along the cliffs or

passing along Caroline Place to descend the pier hill and turn westwards along the parade. Miss Hotham did not favour walks in the old town, for rude boys had been known to mock or mimic the young ladies, and such impertinence could not be tolerated. To begin with, Rose had headed the procession with Elsie Dosset from No. 12, and assuredly Rose's prettiness should have been a provocation to any boy. Mr. Slade would try and create some excuse to justify him in poking his head above the area railings about the time when the procession might be expected to pass. He would be just visible above the euonymus hedge, but not aggressively so, and even Miss Julia Hotham with her quick, beady black eyes did not appear to notice Mr. Slade, and Miss Julia missed little that could seduce the school's sedateness.

"She's the pick of the bunch," was Mr. Slade's verdict, and it did not apply to Miss Julia.

But as the months went by Rose and Elsie ceased to lead the promenade. Legs were lengthening, and so were skirts, and Rose walked in the second file, the third, the fourth. She was growing fast. She promised to be one of those lithe, willowy young women with lily necks and graceful movements, a figure that floated where others seemed to amble. She held her head high, her face slightly tilted like the face of a flower. Her hair was amber, and she had dark eyes, which was strange. There was wilfulness in that chin, veiled mischief in her dark glances.

"You pretty creature," thought James Slade. "How I wonder——"

And sometimes the passing of youth's parade would leave him very sad.

Moreover, nursery days were over, and Rose and her mother took their meals together at a table in the corner of the dining-room. It was James Slade's pleasure or his pain to wait upon mother and daughter, and to be addressed as "Slade" by the child.

"Slade, I'd like some more custard." Or "Slade, I'd like a mince pie."

"Yes, Miss."

But even in the matter of the girl's healthy appetite the mother was possessive and interfering. There would be little arguments about sugar and jam and pastry. Rose would be ordered to refrain from too much sweet stuff, and warned that she would develop spots. Spots indeed! Mr. Slade was certain that no girl had ever possessed a more perfect and unblemished skin.

"No second helpings, Slade."

"No, madam——"

"But, mother, I could eat——"

"You are being greedy. I won't have your complexion spoilt."

Was a pure complexion a social asset? Apparently it was. And it seemed to James Slade that Mrs. Pomeroy was collecting and hoarding social assets. Rose was property, and perhaps in her own hard way Clara Pomeroy cherished the child as the most precious of her social assets. James Slade could observe those proud and domineering glances, the critical watchfulness over hair and teeth and costume. Rose Pomeroy was more lavishly dressed than any other girl in Miss Hotham's school. In winter she had her fur tippet and her muff, and a little Polish fur cap with a blue plume in it. Vanity of vanities! James Slade both approved and disapproved. Was Clara going to spoil the child, turn her into a piece of pretty conceit and selfish artifice? And yet was Rose, so sweet a child—odalisque fated to bask in her mother's paradise of prosperity? She had a spirit of her own, a quick colour, flashes of light in her dark eyes.

Yes, there were clashes.

Already Rose was attracting boyish devotion. Charlie Richmond was her admirer, and of that James Slade approved. Charles was a wholesome, sturdy yet sensitive lad, the son of his mother and his father.

But there were others.

For the moment young Dosset was the chosen hero, a loud and boastful young beast with an aggressive tuft of sandy hair. Mr. Slade did not like young Dosset, nor did Rose's mother. The Dossets were not up to standard. Mr. Dosset was a provision merchant in the city, whose tie was threaded through a diamond ring, and whose hat was set at a rather vulgar angle.

The particular clash was caused by young Fred Dosset.

"Where are you going, Rose?"

"Only for a walk."

"I think not, my dear."

"But, mother——"

"Yes, I know. That boy is waiting over by the railings. I have told you before, you are not going out with young Dosset. Go and take your things off."

Rose flew into one of her tempers.

"Yes I am. Why shouldn't I?"

"Because I say no."

"I am going."

"You are not."

James Slade was putting the silver away in one of the drawers of the sideboard. He heard the scuffle on the stairs. It descended to the hall. Mrs. Pomeroy was locking the front door, and before he realized his position James Slade was involved in the fracas.

"Slade."

"Yes, madam."

"Take this key, and be ready to unlock the door for visitors."

"Yes, madam."

"And go down and lock the area door."

"Yes, madam."

"And keep the key."

Poor Mr. Slade! He heard the passionate protests and tears reascend the stairs. Was he the daughter's keeper as well as the mother's slave? How cleverly Clara had counted upon his

helpless co-operation! He finished putting away the silver, after going below and locking the area door. Was Clara acting with wisdom in this locking of doors? And yet, in the matter of young Dosset, he agreed with her.

Mr. Slade, half concealed by a curtain, looked out of one of the dining-room windows. Master Dosset was still there, lounging against the iron railings of Caroline Gardens. A crude, bumptious young animal! Mr. Slade stroked his chin, and in spite of a gentle spirit he did lust after an authority that would justify him in crossing the road and giving young Dosset his marching orders. "Now, young man, no use hanging about there. Go and take some of the stuffing out of that tuft." And no doubt young Dosset would have checked him.

Well, his business was to remain at a window and watch for any visitor who might wish to enter, or listen for anyone who might wish to go out, and presently he did hear someone on the stairs, and that someone was coming down with a suggestion of secrecy. Mr. Slade, going out into the hall, saw Rose on the last step but one. She was dressed for the adventure.

"Unlock the door, please, Slade."

Mr. Slade was, for the moment, speechless.

"No, my dear. I think—your mother——"

"I—am—going—out."

She was very pale with the young anger of her revolt. Her chin was tilted, her eyes bright.

"Better not, my dear."

"Slade, give me the key."

He shook his head at her, feeling piteous.

"No, Miss Rose. I think your mother is right about that boy."

"Beast."

James Slade blinked like a man who had been hit in the face.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but sometimes it is better to be a beast."

She gave a flick of the head, stood quivering and hesitant, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

"No, I didn't mean that. You're not a beast. It's Mother who——"

"Don't say that, my dear. She may be doing what she thinks best. You are rather precious—to us all—Rose."

Her face was level with his, and suddenly she closed her wet eyes, and seemed to droop to him like a flower.

"I'm sorry. Kiss me, Mr. Slade, and say you know I didn't mean it."

James Slade kissed her on the forehead.

"Thank you, my dear. I never want to be a beast to you."

VIII

I

DR. RICHMOND came into lunch with the air of a man who had something on his mind. He had been to see Mr. Truslove, and in plain English he did not like the look of Mr. Truslove, not as a man, but as a patient. Mr. Truslove had a hard, high tension pulse, and was suffering from attacks of breathlessness and faintness, and inexplicable headaches. Dr. Richmond did not discuss his patients with his wife, but he had another matter on his mind, and it was a problem which Mrs. Richmond could share with him.

"Old Woosnam sent for me to-day."

"I hope he is not ill again?"

"No. A matter of business."

Dr. Richmond had pulled Mr. Woosnam through an attack of acute pneumonia, and Mr. Woosnam went about saying that the doctor had rescued him from a cold bed in St. John's Churchyard. Mr. Woosnam was the senior partner in the firm of Messrs. Woosnam & Wilkins, Auctioneers and Estate Agents.

Dr. Richmond helped himself to mustard.

"The fact is, Woosnam wanted to do me a good turn. An adventure in real estate."

"Land, John?"

"Well, yes. Southfleet seems to be growing like a gourd. Land values are trebling, even in the outskirts. The old timber-yard is coming on the market."

"In High Street?"

"Yes."

"But what a pity! I should be so sorry to lose that old place."

"So should I. It's real. It smells of real things."

"And the trees, those fine old chestnuts."

"Yes, they'll be doomed. Woosnam told me I could buy the site for two thousand pounds, and that in a year or two it might be worth twenty."

"What, for shops?"

"Exactly. But somehow it doesn't pique me. I can't be money-minded."

"I'm glad, John," said she; "there is so much more in your life than that. The people here think of you in a different way."

"I wonder."

"Oh, yes, they do. What you give them isn't merely for money. It may sound silly, but the town would be—hurt—if you turned—trader."

Dr. Richmond smiled at his wife.

"You are very sensitive—about my——"

"No, just proud of it, John. I like to think of you as one of the few men who labour for the love of the thing."

"Well, I thanked old Woosnam and said no to him."

"I'm glad."

Mrs. Richmond was right, and her rightness in such matters made her the beloved person that she was. Doubtless much of the new Southfleet that travelled daily to the city and engaged in obscure and sometimes sinister commecrial scrambles would have thought Dr. Richmond's wife a sentimental fool, yet

there were simpler folk who would have understood her delicate and fastidious feeling about such a transaction. The old timber-yard and its trees were part of a memory, a pattern that was pleasant and gracious, one of those wholesome realities which can besmudged over or erased by some improving and mercenary hand. But there was more to it than that. She who had suffered love and been tortured by it and seen it return to her with tenderness and contrition, was jealous of the pride that had shared its consummation. Would she see her husband among the money-changers? No. His world had come to think of him as a man who laboured more for the love of the things he did than for the material reward that might follow after. If such fastidious and ungreedy souls were becoming rare in the new world, so much the worse would the world be for it.

None the less, Southfleet was indeed the happy hunting-ground of the speculator, and legitimately so for those who had the foresight and the money to spread and who valued property—and what reasonable man does not? Those who lack it may decry it, but not one man in a million would refuse to accept a nice fat legacy plumped upon his plate by some generous testator. Dr. Richmond could dare to be fastidious because his professional income was a substantial one. Moreover, when the beauty of England is considered, those who have preserved it are the Dukes and the great gentlemen. The middle-class mind may see beauty only in a factory or a row of jerry-built cottages, and an uneducated democracy may spill a standardized ugliness over the land. The old craftsmen were dead or dying. A hundred years might pass before a hygienic and municipal world would be re-educated back into the artist's world. Perhaps—never.

Dr. Richmond expressed his thanks to Mr. Woosnam for the private information received and refused it, and Mr. Woosnam looked with coy affection at his physician.

"I rather thought you would refuse, doctor."

"Just putting temptation in my way, sir!"

Mr. Woosnam allowed himself a chuckle.

"No, doctor. Kissing goes by favour, but not with us—of course. I know someone else who will—be a probable purchaser."

"I won't ask who it is."

"And if you did I couldn't tell you."

"Why don't you buy the yard yourself, Woosnam?"

"I prefer not to be responsible——"

"For what may happen there?"

"Yes, partly so. Besides, it wouldn't be professional."

"You have to consider clients?"

"That is my business, doctor."

Dr. Richmond, sitting beside Mr. Truslove's bed later in the morning, and knowing that a friendly gossip might be more cheering to Mr. Truslove than mere medicine, put the case before him in confidence, for Mr. Truslove had some of the wisdom of Solomon. Mr. Truslove listened, and having reflected upon the case, confessed that some ten years ago he might have done business with Mr. Woosnam.

"But not now, Richmond. I might as well buy myself a gold coffin. I suppose one must be growing senile when a bargain does not pique one."

"Or—wise."

"With the wisdom of your wife. May I get up for an hour or two to-day?"

"No walking up and down stairs."

"No. I'll just sit on the balcony and gape at humanity."

"Anyone to help you dress?"

"Yes, Jimmy Slade. There's a philosopher for you."

"Rather a quaint creature—something of a mystery."

"A little more than that, doctor. A man-child, if you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"Unless ye become as little children—Great Scott, fancy an old buccaneer like me—quoting scripture!"

"Isn't it possible that a buccaneer may have more feeling for—human goodness—than a bishop?"

"Quite likely, Richmond. Unless you have seen life ugly how can you value—the other thing that's good?"

2

To Southfleet humorists Mr. Woosnam and Mr. Wilkins were known as Box and Cox. Mr. Woosnam suggested a benign and silvery ape, Mr. Wilkins a gentlemanly ram. Mr. Woosnam, when he wished to dodge a decision, would confess that he could not make it without Mr. Wilkins's co-operation, and if Mr. Woosnam winked his right eye, Mr. Wilkins knew that it behoved him to be non-consenting. Both Mr. Woosnam and Mr. Wilkins were as honest as business and their clients allowed them to be. You could not always tell the truth when some dubious piece of property had to be advertised and sold, but in painting the commercial lily both gentlemen were artists.

Mr. Wilkins put his head into Mr. Woosnam's room, and made a face.

"She's—here. Want to see her or shall I?"

Mr. Woosnam blew his nose.

"I can. We agreed to let her in; didn't we? Shan't need you unless she's difficult."

"Right you are. Make her stick to the price."

"I will."

So, Mrs. Pomeroy was shown by a clerk into Mr. Woosnam's room, and Mr. Woosnam rose politely, indicated a chair, and sat down behind his desk.

"Glad to say I have some good news for you, madam. The first refusal is now yours—at the price mentioned. But only for a limited period."

Mrs. Pomeroy laid her bag on Mr. Woosnam's desk.

"I don't shilly-shally, Mr. Woosnam. When—I——"

"Quite so, madam. Of course if you are prepared to pay the price."

"I can offer fifteen hundred."

Mr. Woosnam was benign and bland.

"Out of the question, madam. That is our client's price, and we cannot advise him to reduce it."

"I see. Freehold, of course?"

"Absolutely."

"No restrictions?"

"None—within reason."

"What—exactly—do you mean by that?"

"Well, madam, mere formality—in a sense. The Local Board and its surveyor might not allow you to erect a slaughter-house on the site. And a public-house might be refused a licence. Just—examples."

"And quite irrelevant, Mr. Woosnam. I mean to sit on the site, not build."

Mr. Woosnam smiled at her candour. He could picture her as a very large and formidable hen sitting there and hatching out the golden eggs.

"I see, madam. A purchase—to resell."

"Exactly."

"When the figure suits you."

Mrs. Pomeroy bent a fugal head to him.

Doubtless Mrs. Pomeroy had not heard of Surplus Value, and would have scorned the phrase and its implications had they been explained to her, for necessity and the humiliations that a bankrupt estate can impose upon a gentlewoman had emphasized all that was feline in her. She was like a mature lioness who had claimed her cave and her hunting-ground, and had a cub of her own, and was moved to prowl in search of plunder. She was a shrewd and observant woman with very definite ambitions, social and otherwise, and having appraised the significance of Southfleet's tendency to spread, she had proposed to exploit it. Three per cent did not thrill Mrs. Pomeroy. If you could treble your capital in a year or two, and invest the proceeds in fat mortgages and house property, that was good business. Already,

Mrs. Pomeroy had picked up bargains in bricks and mortar, and she had the wherewithal for more spacious adventure. For years, now, the hotel had prospered and enabled her to save a considerable sum yearly. Not for ever would Mrs. Pomeroy live as an hotelier. She would return to that state of life from which a fool man's bungling had expelled her.

So, the ultimate fate of the timber-yard was sealed, and Mrs. Pomeroy, passing down the High Street, stood for a moment under the chestnut trees, and listened to the screaming saw, and looked at the stacks of timber and the tree boles waiting to be dealt with. Assuredly it would be possible to keep the timber-yard as a going concern until enterprising gentlemen sought urgently for frontages. With local building on the increase and timber in demand the yard itself might be a profitable investment. Then, when the value of sites began to soar she could consider selling. It did not occur to her that these splendid trees which had given a green refreshment to the old street would have to fall. Mrs. Pomeroy was not that sort of woman.

She walked on, past the Regency Hotel, to Caroline Terrace, and there she saw two young people crossing the roadway to the gate of Caroline Gardens, Rose and young Hector Hallard. Mrs. Pomeroy's authority did not fly towards intervention. She smiled and suffered youth to pass, for Hallard was not Dosset. Hector was at Harrow, and the Hallards county folk who deigned to dwell in No. 19, a spacious house with a garden of three acres. A Hallard would tone well with Mrs. Pomeroy's colour-scheme, nor were the Hallards so prosperous that they could afford to look askance at capital. The Hallard income derived from land, and with the agricultural depression at its blackest, the Hallards were not far from Queer Street. So, Mrs. Pomeroy smiled upon some romantic prospect, though romance to her spelt prestige and social splendours.

Mr. Slade, though becoming more and more a person, did long at times to escape from boots and silver and clanging bells. How long would his penance last, and for how many years would it be his duty to endure it? James Slade still used that good old English word, Nelson word, though it was becoming out of favour. Duty to whom? A person called God? Poof, humbug and an excuse for the bloody caste system! Moreover, the emotional penance that had been imposed upon him would remain, far more poignant than any material bondage; and yet, were he to escape from too close a contact with that tender and human provocation, it might be easier to bear.

Freedom!

But how could a man be free on twopence? Well, that was an exaggeration. Mrs. Pomeroy did pay him ten shillings a week and his washing-money. Then there were the tips, though the Caroline Hotel was not lavish in this respect. Elderly gentlewomen had strange ideas upon largesse. Did not Miss Popham beckon him occasionally to her table, and say, with an impressive and benignant air, "I have something for you, Slade."

The something was a shilling.

Sitting on his bed and figuring it out, Mr. Slade calculated that he could count about forty pounds a year in cash. On the debit side were clothes, boots, hair-cuts, his Sunday paper, an occasional book, sixpence a week in the church plate, Christmas and presents to his fellow workers, perhaps a twopenny tramride on the pier, a bag of cherries when they were in season. The yearly credit balance might amount to fifteen or twenty pounds. In ten years——? He might be dead in ten years.

Yet, if Mrs. Pomeroy dreamed dreams and very practical ones, James Slade did likewise, nor did his dreams lack practicability, though on a far humbler scale. Mr. Truslove had described him as a child-man, and if Mr. Slade was becoming more and more a

child with children, his dream might be Alice In Wonderland. He too wandered up Southfleet's High Street, and into the Victoria Road where new shops were being opened, but the Victoria Road, bold and yellow of brick, did not captivate James Slade. His love was the old High Street with its more mellow sagacity and its humour. This was Toy Town as James Slade understood it. And what did Southfleet lack? Here were chemists, ironmongers, haberdashers, clothiers, butchers, bakers, a wine shop, grocers, hairdressers. But where was the toy-shop, the children's corner? Mr. Slade made the strange discovery that Southfleet possessed no adequate toy-shop. Mr. Kemp the stationer did give part of a window to such trifles, but rather condescendingly so. Yes, what the town needed was a toy-shop.

Mr. Slade allowed himself a play of fancy. Now, if he had a few hundred pounds behind him he would have opened a toy-shop in Southfleet High Street. But where? No premises appeared to be available, and Mr. Slade's shop would have to be a very small one, just two modest windows and a door. Obviously, his dream was ridiculous, but he continued to dream it, as a young man dreams of love, or a prisoner of liberty. And since his toy-shop could be nothing but a Castle in Spain, Mr. Slade gave himself more and more to contact with children.

He was permitted to absent himself from duty for half an hour in the afternoon, and James Slade would disappear into Caroline Gardens. He played touch-wood there with the Nelson children, and the Barnets and the Berries, dodging round trees in the kind of dell which was the children's playground. And sometimes Rose joined them, though she was growing too old and too conscious of her young dignity for such romps.

Mrs. Pomeroy surprised Mr. Slade there one day, minus hat and coat and dodging about with a bevy of laughing and shouting children. His bowler hat and coat lay on a seat. Mr. Slade happened to be the toucher, and was chasing hither and thither,

trying to catch one of the youngsters as they scurried from tree to tree.

Mrs. Pomeroy was shocked.

"Slade."

Mr. Slade stood still, suddenly old and unchildlike.

"Yes, madam."

"I want to speak to you."

She withdrew along one of the shady paths, and Mr. Slade followed her.

"At your age—making a fool of yourself like that!"

"I'm sorry, madam, but——"

"It is positively indecent. Ridiculous. Go and put your hat and coat on."

Mr. Slade looked at her piteously.

"But I don't think children feel like that."

"What do—you—know about children? Don't be silly, man. Go and put on your hat and coat."

Mr. Slade obeyed her, but rebellion was stirring in him, as in the heart of a child.

IX

I

JAMES SLADE went to put on his hat and coat and to make somewhat shame-faced excuses to the children.

"Afraid I must go now. Work to do."

"Oh, don't go, Mr. Slade."

"Must do, my dear."

"You hadn't caught anybody."

They had gathered round him, and suddenly little Lucy Barnett clutched Mr. Slade about the waist.

"Yes, he has, he's caught me."

Mr. Slade picked up Lucy and kissed her.

"Thank you, my dear. So I have! Now, you go on playing. Oh, here's sixpence for some sweets—share and share alike, you know."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Slade."

"Oo—yes. We won't be greedy."

Mr. Slade left them, somewhat comforted and reassured in spirit. So, he knew nothing about children! Well, well, well! But surely Clara need not have humiliated him quite so openly. Indecent, ridiculous! How a woman like Clara did like to blame.

Now, Caroline Gardens, descending steeply to the sea-front, was full of bosky retreats, winding paths and secret seats, and on one of these seats recessed in a bower of ivy sat another child who was ceasing to be a child. Rose had a book on her knees, and it was *Lorna Doone*. The seat overlooked a part of the play-ground, and was just above that path upon which Mrs. Pomeroy had reproved a silly old man, but the seat was invisible unless you walked directly past it, and on a path that diverged from the scene of James Slade's scolding. Rose had been able to command a part of that leafy playground and to see the figures flitting to and fro, in the spaces between the oak boughs, the boys in their sailor suits, the girls in gay frocks, Mr. Slade in dark trousers, waistcoat and white shirt sleeves. His head had grown whiter during the last two years. The working world might have spoken of him with affection as Old Silver Knob. And to Rose, in the puzzling and mysterious days of youth's flowering, James Slade had come to possess a peculiar provocation in that he was so different from her mother. This old man was never out of temper. There were little, kindly wrinkles round his eyes, and they were kind eyes, and more than kind. You felt—somehow—that you could tell things to Mr. Slade, and that he would understand you, and not quote the ten commandments. Her mother's tyranny was imposing a dreadful muteness upon Rose, and driving inwards into secrecy all the spontaneity of her warm, quick temperament.

Rose, in a yellow frock, and looking like a primrose on a green bank, called softly to the old man.

"Oh, Mr. Slade——"

James Slade suddenly stood still, his head cocked like a bird's. What syren note was this? Oh, yes, he knew.

"Miss Rose! Where are you?"

"Come and find me."

Mr. Slade knew that seat under the hood of rustic-work and ivy, but before he ventured near it he walked some way up the path which Mrs. Pomeroy had taken. But Mrs. Pomeroy had disappeared. Her bombastic, matriarchal bustle did not wink at him in the scatter of light and shadow. Mr. Slade walked softly back to the ivy bower where Rose sat with her book upon her knees.

"Hallo, my dear. Studying?"

She looked up at him with peculiar, mute solemnity, and Mr. Slade, suddenly realizing that he was hot after scurrying about the playground, removed his hat and wiped his forehead.

"What is it, French or History?"

Her response to the question was a sidelong glide along the seat. Mr. Slade was to sit down beside her. He sat down, knees together, his hat upon them, his hands folded upon it.

She showed him the book.

"Oh, *Lorna Doone*," said he.

"Have you read it?"

"As a matter of fact I have. It's a lovely book, my dear."

She closed it and placed it upon the seat, between them. There was silence. She was gazing into the green tops of the trees, and in her eyes there was a question.

"Are—things—like that?"

"You mean—like they are in the book, my dear?"

"Yes."

Mr. Slade's fingers knotted themselves together on the crown of his hat.

"Well—yes—and no, I mean—they can be."

Again there was silence and James Slade felt that great word duty buzzing in his silly old brain.

"Things are or can be—what you make them, Miss Rose."

She turned her head and looked at him.

"Don't call me Miss Rose."

"Well, I won't—if you don't like it—except, of course, on formal occasions."

She smiled, and he smiled, but her seriousness returned.

"Have you ever met anyone like John Ridd?"

This was a poser, and Mr. Slade was bothered by it.

"Well, no—not quite like John Ridd—in size—but inside—well—perhaps—yes."

Mr. Slade was remembering how the hero of his own youth had been Charles Kingsley's Amyas Leigh, that large and splendid young man who also had loved a Rose, and had ended his days in blindness. Not that Jimmy Slade had had any justification for claiming any resemblance to his hero. Only once had he fought at school, and disastrously so, to be presented with a bloody nose and one black eye. No Amyas he! But Rose and her book were different. Rose might find the Lorna or the Annie in herself, and in her outward comeliness had every right to do so, but it seemed to Mr. Slade that her young self was questioning the inward validity of the book. Was it sentimental make-believe or reality?

He groped about for human exemplars.

"Good people, you mean, my dear, people who make you feel that—life's—good."

"Yes, but not goody-goody."

"God forbid! Well, there is Mrs. Richmond; she's a lovely person."

"Yes—but——"

"And dear old Robinson in the choir."

"You mean—the carpenter?"

Did old Robinson lack romance? Perhaps so. Mr. Slade's fingers drummed on the crown of his hat.

"Well, and Dr. Richmond. Everybody loves him. And our Mr. Truslove—so full of integrity. But perhaps you want them young? Well, Charlie Richmond is——"

"I think he is rather conceited."

"Do you? But he's got good eyes. Look at a man's eyes, my dear, and his mouth. If he's a little shy and silent, so much the better."

"Charles isn't at all shy."

"Is that so? Well, well, he's not like young Dosset. But—perhaps—I'm interfering."

She smiled at him.

"I think you have forgotten someone."

"Who's that, my dear?"

And then she said a thing that made Mr. Slade's hands press so hard on his hat that he dented it.

"Why—you, Mr. Slade."

James, regarding the dent in his hat, inserted a hand and restored it to shape, the hard felt going back with a crack.

"Oh, I'm nothing, my dear, just an old fellow."

"I don't think so."

"That's very sweet of you, Miss Rose. Dear me, I ought to be going now. Mr. Truslove will want his tea."

James Slade fled, almost like a blushing boy, full of inward confusion and strange exultation. Dear God, did she see him among the angels, standing and singing beside Lucy Richmond, and dear old Robinson, and not as an obscure and rather shabby creature who humbly did those things which God had given him to do? Mr. Slade was walking so fast that his walk became a trot. Mr. Kemp the gardener, opening the gate for him, remarked upon this haste.

"What's the hurry, Mr. Slade?"

Mr. Slade indeed!

"I'm afraid I'm late. Mr. Truslove's tea, you know. He does so love his cup of tea."

When James Slade opened the door of No. 1 he came im-

mediately within the field of vision of a sick man's eyes. They seemed to have been waiting for him. There was a kind of apprehension in them. Mr. Truslove was propped up against his pillows, and his very white hands lay flaccid upon the coverlet.

"Afraid I'm late, sir."

"Glad to see you, James."

"Here's some buttered toast, sir. Think you can manage it?"

"I'll try."

Mr. Slade slid the tray gently on to Mr. Truslove's legs. Mr. Truslove was scrutinizing James's face.

"You look—pleased about something, Jimmy."

"I am, sir."

"Been playing with the kids?"

"Yes, sir."

"You big old child. God bless you, James. You do me good."

"Do I, sir? I don't know why—but I'm glad."

Mr. Truslove patted Mr. Slade's sleeve.

"You old innocent. Don't know what I should do without you."

"It's very kind of you to say so, sir. I'm sure it is a pleasure to do anything I can. I put on a slice of plum cake, sir."

"James, you—take the cake!"

2

Master Charles Richmond, home from school, and rather cocky about his cricket and his passage from the Lower to the Upper school on the Modern Side, found that he had been supplanted, or seemingly so, by young Hallard. Master Charles objected to Hallard, and he was objecting to many things, including the title of Master. Couldn't a chap drop that sort of prefix which suggested that he was still wearing socks? And confound young Hallard! As a matter of fact Hector was two years older than Charles, and Harrow, whereas Charles was Merchant Taylors, and a boarder in old Makin's house. Hector was very

much Hector, a man of the world at seventeen, dark and dudish and chilly, with a sleepy and insolent smile. Charles was not pleased with the holidays.

He sulked. He exhibited a loutishness that was a little puzzling to his parents, and Dr. Richmond, surveying his son, supposed that it was sex. An awkward and uncomfortable period this, when the new urge could become aggressive, and produce those unpleasant phenomena which seem to soil the soul of a child.

His mother was troubled. Charles had been such a sensitive yet open-faced boy, and here was this rather morose and rude stranger who talked too much and too bumpuously, or not at all.

"What is the matter with Charlie?"

Her husband prevaricated. Somehow, it seemed unfair to Lucy that she should have to suffer that which can wound some mothers and leave others unaware of its existence. The spotty stage, the child growing up and away from you, and becoming man and tarnished! Nor was the phase much less pleasing to Dr. Richmond, even though he could not play the pompous prig about it. What was one to do in such a case? Provoke the candour of a confessional?

Now Dr. Richmond had become wise in his humanity. It happened that Charles was rude to his father, contradicting him upon a point of history and, when gently reproved, was ruder still.

"Well, pater, I ought to know. We have just been doing that period. It is a long time since you were at school."

And Dr. Richmond laughed in a quiet and kindly way that was exasperating to youth.

"If I have forgotten some things, my' son, there are other things which you do not remember."

Charles looked sulky, and stood on the hearthrug with his hands in his trousers pockets. He was feeling rather a beast, but an incorrigible beast.

"What things, pater?"

"Never mind. They may occur to you when you are a little older."

But what did Dr. Richmond do? Bicycles were just becoming the rage, and Dr. Richmond called at Mr. Giggins's cycle shop, which hitherto had specialized in tricycles and prams, and bought the latest model, a semi-racing machine. It was delivered the same morning, and Charles, returning from an unsuccessful attempt to waylay Rose, found the machine parked in the hall. What was the meaning of this? Was the pater taking to a bike? If so he had selected a jolly fine machine. Dear Hector had not anything like it, but a boneshaker with solid tyres. Pneumatics, what! And a high gear. Charles coveted the machine in all its polished newness.

His father happened to come in while Charles was trying the brakes and the bell.

"Hullo, my lad. How do you like the look of it?"

"Jolly fine," said Charles.

"Well, it's yours," and Dr. Richmond passed on to his consulting-room.

Charles stood a moment, with a sudden shock of self-shame possessing him. Then he followed his father. Dr. Richmond was sitting down at his desk.

"I say, pater—do you really mean it's mine?"

"Of course."

Charles looked flushed. He seemed to fumble for the words that he wanted to utter.

"It's—awfully—decent. I mean—— I'm sorry I was such a beast—this morning."

"That's all right, Charles."

"Thanks, pater. I didn't——"

"I know. A bit bothered about something, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, get on that bike this afternoon, and ride to Chelsford, and see if you can be back by tea."

A sudden smile came into Charles's eyes. Great Scott, wasn't the world right when it believed his father to be a wise and inspired physician?

3

Mr. Slade was cleaning the silver when a bell rang tumultuously in the passage. It had an urgent, clamorous note, and James hurried out to identify it.

No. 1!

James Slade stood for a moment, wiping his hands on his apron. Mr. Truslove's bell. Mr. Truslove, unlike many of the other residents, was not an inconsiderate ringer of bells. The clapper had ceased striking the metal, but the bell-spring was still a'quiver, and it roused in James Slade a sudden feeling of apprehension.

He scurried up the stairs. He opened the door of No. 1, and was about to speak when he was silenced by the figure in the bed. Mr. Truslove was sitting up with a look of anguish on his face. His hands were clutching the bed-clothes. His eyes protruded. He seemed to be trying to breathe with a chest that had become rigid.

"It's my heart, Jimmy. Such pain—can't breathe."

Mr. Slade was shocked into a kind of palsy. Mr. Truslove had the look of a man who was being throttled by invisible hands. His voice had come in a husky, thread-like sound. His face was drawn with anguish, and all scored with creases.

"The doctor——"

"I'll fetch him at once, sir."

Mr. Slade dashed down the stairs and out into the sunlight, his knees going up and down under his green apron. The other man's fear, his friend's fear, seemed to be his. He was panting when he reached Dr. Richmond's door, and his forehead glistened with sweat.

X

I

THERE was no doubt about it. Mr. Truslove had had an attack of angina, that dreadful spasm of the heart when the victim feels like some doomed animal in an anguish of apprehension, not daring to move. Dr. Richmond could say to his partner, "I haven't liked the look of old Truslove for quite a long time," and that was all that could be said about it. A box of Amyl Nitrite capsules took its place beside Mr. Truslove's bed.

And poor Mr. Slade had come in for a scolding. Hurrying back from his quest of the doctor he had run into the arms of Mrs. Pomeroy.

"What is the meaning of this, Slade?"

"What, madam?"

"Rushing out in your shirt sleeves and apron."

"I have been for the doctor, madam. Mr. Truslove——"

"What is the matter with Mr. Truslove?"

"His heart, madam, I think."

Mrs. Pomeroy was not pleased.

"In the future, Slade, when anyone is unwell you will immediately inform me."

"Yes, madam, but——"

"No buts, Slade, no buts."

Had Mr. Slade been less upset by his friend's anguish he might have been provoked into vulgar and ironic retort. Buts, water-butts, wine-butts, the butts of trees, the wagging posterior of—— James Slade remember your manners! But Clara really was an incredible person, a most incredible person, and she became even more so when she waylaid Dr. Richmond in the hall. Mr. Slade was lurking and listening on the kitchen stairs.

"Is it—serious, Dr. Richmond?"

"I am afraid so. Angina. He will have to remain in bed for a time."

"Really, a great nuisance. It should be a hospital case. A chronic invalid in an hotel is more than I can manage."

Occasions were rare when Dr. Richmond showed temper, but this was such an occasion.

"Do you mean to say, Mrs. Pomeroy, that you contemplate turning a sick man out of your hotel?"

"Well, doctor, it is very inconvenient——"

"I may as well tell you that you cannot do it."

"I beg your pardon, I——"

"What is more, I won't have my patient worried. It is absolutely essential that he should not be distressed or worried. After all, he has been here a good many years. Your hotel is—in a sense—his home."

"I suggest, doctor, that I am responsible for——"

"Excuse me, I—am responsible. If my patient is worried, and has a fatal attack, you—will be responsible. Please understand that. Surely—a little kindness——"

"Will he need a nurse?"

"He may do."

"I really can't have a nurse in the hotel. So—depressing for my other guests. Besides, nurses always make trouble."

Dr. Richmond's voice became cold and emphatic.

"Mrs. Pomeroy, I warn you that if any interference should prove fatal to my patient, I shall make the matter public."

"Libel—doctor?"

"Nothing of the kind. But I should be quite prepared to go into court on such an issue."

"But who is to look after Mr. Truslove?"

This was too much for Mr. Slade. He had been seething on the stairs. The worm had turned. Really—Clara was incredible. If it had been his lot to put on paper a character-study of Clara, how could he have made her credible? Clara was cast-iron.

Mr. Slade appeared suddenly in the hall.

"Excuse me, Dr. Richmond, did I hear someone ask who would look after Mr. Truslove?"

Dr. Richmond bent his head.

"That is the question."

"Well, I—can do it."

Mrs. Pomeroy turned on this rampant worm.

"Slade, go back to your work. It is no business of yours."

And then the worm bit her.

"I beg to differ, madam. Mr. Truslove is my friend. If you please—you will leave him to me."

Mrs. Pomeroy stood like Lot's wife. She stared at Mr. Slade, a new Mr. Slade somehow become intractable and resolute. He looked her in the face. He appeared ready to say, "Be careful, Clara, or I shall—speak." Mrs. Pomeroy drew one deep breath and held it. She might be a woman of implacable selfishness, but there was a something in James Slade's eyes that daunted her.

"Oh, very well, Slade. If you can find the time——"

"That will be easy, madam. Have I your permission, doctor?"

Dr. Richmond smiled at Mr. Slade.

"I think you will make an excellent male nurse."

2

Mr. Slade was very busy. The bell-handle was some two yards from Mr. Truslove's bed, and James Slade was attaching a stout piece of string to it, and Mr. Truslove, with his head laid sideways on the pillow, was watching him. Mr. Slade's movements were quiet and deliberate, and his lips were puckered up and emitting a ghost of a whistle. Mr. Truslove was thinking things about James Slade which Mr. Slade had never thought about himself. This elderly man gave to the other old man a feeling of security and of peace."

"Jimmy——"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't—call—me—sir."

"No, sir."

"There you go again. Tell me, did that beldam want to turn me out?"

"She? Oh, no," lied Mr. Slade, "she's not quite as—— Well, never mind. I think this is going to do the trick."

Mr. Slade carried the string along the wall, and fastened the end of it to the brass bedpost. Then he gave the string a tweak, and watched the bell-handle to satisfy himself that it responded with the proper movement.

"That looks all right. Can you reach the string?"

"I can."

"Well, you can ring any time in the day or night—and I'll run up. I'll sleep with my door open."

Mr. Slade looked happily at his improvisation.

"We'd better try it and make sure. I'll go downstairs. Count ten and then pull the string."

He pattered off downstairs, and Mr. Truslove felt for the string and held it. He counted ten and then gave a tug. Mr. Slade was down in the basement passage watching the bell of No. 1. He saw it jerk and heard it peal out merrily. Good business! That bit of string had been a brain-wave.

He was reascending the stairs when Mrs. Pomeroy came out of her room. After the defeat she had suffered some reassertion of authority was indicated.

"Is that Mr. Truslove's bell?"

"Yes, madam."

"What does he keep ringing for?"

"He doesn't, madam. It's an experiment."

"A—what?"

"An experiment. I have arranged it so that he can ring for me without getting out of bed."

Mr. Slade passed on, and Mrs. Pomeroy re-entered her room and stood reflecting. Now—why? Oh, well, wasn't it obvious? James Slade was playing the Agag to Mr. Truslove's money.

The self-same cynical thought had occurred to Mr. Truslove, and been laughed out of court with complete confidence. If ever

there was a Christlike creature, James Slade was that person. Mr. Truslove, watching for the opening of the door, saw Mr. Slade's happy face, the face of a man child.

"It works."

Mr. Truslove, propped up on his pillows, regarded his friend with sly affection.

"Why the devil should you do all this for me, James?"

"Why?"

Mr. Slade's face was an open book, and no palimpsest.

"Why—well—of course—because I like it."

"Trotting up and down stairs after a fussy old fool."

Mr. Slade looked puzzled, challenged.

"It isn't at all like that. You've been very kind to me."

"Fudge, Jimmy."

"Oh yes, you have. You have been a friend, and if one can't do things for a friend, there isn't much sense in life, is there?"

"You dear old innocent," said Mr. Truslove, "anyone would think you were out of the Bible."

"Me, sir?"

"Grammar, wrong, and that superfluous sir."

"I read my Bible."

"You do a little more than that, James. Come and sit with me for ten minutes. You do me good."

Mr. Truslove, like many men who are lonely and near the final crossing, liked to revert to the past and live some of its memories over again. He had an album of photographs, and having asked Mr. Slade to bring it to him, he opened the book on his knees. Some of the photographs were faded, portraits of the Trusloves who were dead. One whole page was given to a girl, a slim, dark, innocent-looking creature, and Mr. Truslove's fingers lingered there.

"Yes, that was Kitty. All sorts of things might have been different—if she had lived. I should not have been a sort of wandering Jew. Hullo, here is Ceylon. I was there ten years, planting. Ever been out East, James?"

"No."

"Kipling was so darned right. Hullo, there is someone at the door."

Both old heads were turned towards the door.

"See who it is, James."

Mr. Slade went to the door, opened it, and discovered Rose with a bunch of white and purple asters in her hand.

"Hullo, my dear."

"I thought Mr. Truslove might like these."

"Who is it, James?" asked Mr. Truslove.

"Rose, I mean—Miss Pomeroy, sir."

"Gracious, James, ask her to come in."

"Will you come in, my dear?"

Rose walked in.

She was in white, with a red belt, and appearing to both old men a slim figure of sudden, exquisite maturity. Mr. Truslove closed his album and pointed to a chair.

"What, flowers for me? How very charming."

He stretched out a hand for the flowers.

"Come and sit down, my dear. You are as good to look at as your posy. Yes, an old man can say that sort of thing, you know. James, can you find a vase?"

Mr. Slade's eyes were upon Rose.

"Yes, of course, sir. I'll go and find one."

Rose sat down on a chair beside Mr. Truslove's bed. Here was April in its young dignity, serious and a little shy, but ready with sudden smiles. Mr. Truslove was thinking, "You pretty creature. Am I being sentimental? Well, damn it, why not? And how the devil did your mother produce you? No chip from that old block!" But Rose was shy, and Mr. Truslove had to supply the conversation. He reopened the album and, still holding the flowers, began a playful monologue.

"First pages—the Truslove grandfather and grandmother. Next pages, Pa and Ma, with John Truslove in curls and velvet. That's me. Funny things—old portraits. Turn over and see me

—in trousers. Enough to make one laugh, isn't it? And how I fancied myself in that first tail coat!"

Rose had taken the album on to her knees. She was sitting obliquely to the bed, her head bent, her profile showing against the window. Mr. Truslove was observing her, and suddenly he made a strange discovery. His secret self uttered a soundless shout. "Great Scott, of course! Why didn't I see it before? She—and——" At that moment Mr. Slade reappeared with a glass vase full of water, and Mr. Truslove surrendered the flowers.

"I'll have them on the table there, James, between me and the light."

"Very good, sir."

Mr. Slade busied himself with arranging the flowers, and Mr. Truslove observed him. James Slade's profile and the girl's could be compared, and Mr. Truslove, having scrutinized and compared them, repeated that inward exclamation, "Great Scott, why didn't I tumble to it before?"

3

Mr. Truslove lay and listened to Southfleet's summer sounds, a distant burble from the beach, the merry mechanism of a barrel organ, the clop-clop of horses' hoofs on the roadway below. Mr. Truslove was in a meditative mood and reflecting upon past, present and future. Strange how they linked up and merged. When did yesterday become to-day, and to-day to-morrow? Time was just part of yourself, a mental clock inside you. Mr. Truslove had had a peaceful night. He might wonder when those heart-pangs would return, but to be without them was heaven.

Mr. Truslove heard wheels come to rest outside the house. That would be Dr. Richmond. Mr. Truslove was ready for Dr. Richmond, and proposing to ask him a pertinent question. Moreover, Dr. Richmond was a reassuring person; he did not come smiling into a room, rubbing his hands, vacuously and falsely sympathetic.

"Well, how are we to-day?"

Mr. Truslove hated that sort of humbug.

So, he asked his question.

"Richmond, don't you think I ought to make a will?"

"Haven't you made one?"

"Yes, but it's a little obsolete. Would you prescribe it? Don't be afraid to be candid."

"Certainly. I should make a will—if you are not satisfied with the old one."

"Good. Then I'll have Grigson in. I understand that he is a man who can keep his mouth shut."

"Absolutely."

It was James Slade who carried Mr. Truslove's note to Mr. Grigson, and it was James who opened the door to Mr. Grigson when he called. Mr. Grigson towered in his lean height over Mr. Slade; the kind of hard hat he wore made him look even taller. Mr. Grigson had an air of austerity that could verge upon grimness, but it was more legal than actual, for Mr. Grigson had lost an only son, and his wife was an invalid. There was no more kind-hearted man in Southfleet, and his integrity was as straight as his long, lean figure. And Mr. Slade, having seen that head and those shoulders bowed in church and somehow expressing resignation, was not afraid of Mr. Grigson.

"Mr. Truslove is expecting you, sir."

Mr. Grigson's face ran into deep creases when he smiled. He was one of those who had come to regard Mr. Slade as a person.

James led the way up the stairs, opened Mr. Truslove's door and announced the visitor.

"Mr. Grigson, sir."

Mr. Grigson disappeared within, and Mr. Slade, closing the door, descended to his duties, so that he neither saw nor heard that other door open, and Mrs. Pomeroy came softly out on to the landing. She approached the door of No. 1, and stood there

listening. Mr. Grigson and Mr. Truslove were indulging in friendly small-talk before entering upon the more serious matters of the moment.

"If you will give me your instructions, Mr. Truslove, I will note them, and have a rough draft prepared."

Mrs. Pomeroy drew closer to the door. Drat the man, why couldn't he speak more loudly and more clearly, for Mr. Truslove's voice appeared to be no more than a whisper. How very exasperating! Was the old man doing it on purpose? As a matter of fact he was. He had winked at Mr. Grigson and said, "I'll soft pedal, if you don't mind, Grigson. This house can be rather full of interested curiosity." And then Mr. Truslove did a most unsporting thing. He suddenly gave a tweak to Mr. Slade's string, and lay smiling, listening and waiting.

Was not that sound suggestive of the sudden swish and rustle of hurriedly departing skirts? Again, Mr. Truslove winked at the lawyer. James Slade, hurrying up the stairs, and fearing another heart attack, found the landing empty. He opened Mr. Truslove's door, and saw not an anguished face, but a smiling, mischievous countenance.

"Jimmy, can you find a pen and ink?"

Mr. Slade drew a deep breath.

"Yes, of course, sir. When I heard your bell——"

"You thought I was in trouble, eh. Shouldn't run up stairs, James, at your age."

"I'm not so old as all that, sir. I'll get you a pen and ink from the drawing-room."

Mr. Slade closed the door, and Mr. Truslove smiled at Mr. Grigson.

"No sneaking Simon—that. Absolutely without guile."

"A most likeable fellow."

"My dear sir, much more than that. Did you by any chance detect a flouncy sound out yonder when I rang the bell?"

Mr. Grigson put on spectacles and looked judicial.

"I did fancy that I heard something."

"The tempestuous petticoat. I think we have scared it away." Mr. Slade, still a little breathless, returned with pen and ink.

"Would you like a table, sir?"

"Thank you," said Mr. Grigson. He had produced a memorandum book from a side pocket.

"Cleaning the silver, James?"

"Yes, sir."

"You always seem to be cleaning the silver."

"I like doing it, sir."

"Thank you, James. Some day you will have to polish a halo."

Mrs. Pomeroy did not venture again upon the landing, and Mr. Truslove propounded his instructions in peace. Once only did Mr. Grigson's face express surprise, but austere-ly so, and more to himself than to Mr. Truslove. Moreover, it was a very simple testament, and not likely to be contested, for, as Mr. Truslove said, "There are not many of 'em to quarrel over my bones, and none of 'em know I'm a sick man, so I'm not pestered with sudden affection." A comfortable legacy was to be purchased for Miss Jane Truslove, who lived with a dog and three cats in Cornwall. There were legacies to a nephew who was something of a ruffian but not a cadger, to Dr. Richmond, and to Master Charles Richmond. Each member of the staff was to receive ten pounds.

"Oh, by the way, I have forgotten one particular person. Put Miss Pomeroy down for two hundred."

"If I may say so, Mr. Truslove, you are being very generous."

"After my death, what!"

"Will that cover the whole of your estate?"

"Pretty well. If there is any residue it can go to the Southfleet Cottage Hospital."

"I can assure you it will be appreciated."

XI

I

MR. TRUSLOVE liked Mr. Slade to sit with him, but since James Slade had many duties to perform, such companionship was not easy, for Mrs. Pomeroy appeared to be in a particularly suspicious mood, and urgent in exercising interference. It was "Slade, do this", and "Slade, do that", and Mrs. Pomeroy's bell rang at all sorts of times, and James Slade was expected to answer it. Had Mr. Slade been less gentle of temper he might have cursed that bell, and addressed it in most vulgar language.

It was Mr. Truslove who supplied the solution.

"Why not bring your silver and clean it up here, James?"

"She—might object."

"Let her object. If I don't get my way I shall throw a fit! I'll tell her so, if you like."

So Mr. Slade brought the silver-basket and his cleaning materials up to Mr. Truslove's room and, spreading a newspaper on the floor, posed himself cross-legged on a footstool. There were days when Mr. Truslove was allowed to get up and dress and sit on the balcony. Mr. Slade could not clean the silver on the balcony, so the conversation was carried on through the open french window.

"James, you look like Buddha. Ever read any of the Eastern philosophy?"

"No, I read my Bible."

"Dear friend, that's Eastern too. I am ashamed to say that I have not read the Book for many years. Can you lend me yours?"

"Of course."

"But that's selfish of me. I'll buy one. You need yours. Do you read it daily?"

"I do, sir."

"Hallo, there goes Mrs. Else. Always reminds me of Rahab. I think Rahab must have been rather a good sort."

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Slade, polishing a soup spoon.

Mr. Truslove watched Mrs. Else disappear like Eve into the garden, and then he asked Mr. Slade a question.

"What is your particular text, James?"

"Really, I don't quite know. I've one of my own, but it's very simple."

"Let us hear it."

"Try to help, try not to hurt."

Mr. Truslove reflected upon those simple words.

"Yes, good enough for any God, and too good for Jehovah. You do believe in God, James?"

Mr. Slade's hands became motionless. He looked up at his friend sitting there in the sunlight.

"Yes, I do."

"Any proof, James?"

"Well, I feel Him. He's there in the sunlight, and in the trees, and out there on the sea."

"And in you, James."

"I wouldn't care to claim that, sir."

"I dare do it for you. And in a way you are a proof."

"Me, sir?"

"Grammar wrong again. Yes, you. Do you know, James, you make me feel there must be something."

"That would make me very happy."

When next he was in the High Street Mr. Slade bought a Bible and carried it home to Mr. Truslove. It was the best Bible Mr. Slade had been able to buy, bound in black morocco, and nicely lettered in gold. Nor was it one of those stubborn and contumacious books which refuse to lie open without pressure from above, but wheresoever you opened it, the book lay peacefully at your service as it should.

"I hope it won't be too heavy for you, sir."

Mr. Truslove was handling the book with reverence.

"Not a bit. But you must write in it, James."

"What shall I write?"

"Well, my name, and an inscription. Say 'From James Slade to his friend John Truslove'."

Mr. Truslove passed the Bible back to Mr. Slade.

"You can do it over there at my desk."

Mr. Slade did it over there, blotted the page carefully and carried the book back.

"That's splendid." But Mr. Truslove was interested in more than the inscription. Mr. Slade's handwriting was patently that of an educated man.

2

It did not occur to James Slade that there was any strangeness in his not being asked to act as one of the witnesses to Mr. Truslove's will. Mr. Slade had no interest in this testament, or rather, he just did not think about it, for there was unhappiness in the house, an unhappiness that did concern Mr. Slade very seriously.

Tempests and tears!

Mrs. Pomeroy was no different from any other matriarch, Victorian or otherwise, save perhaps that she liked exerting authority for authority's sake, and not for the moral good of the child, though where the boundary between altruism and egoism lies may be a matter of doubt. Mrs. Else was the cause of these clashes. Rose had developed a girlish passion for the blonde lady, and Mrs. Pomeroy was jealous of her. It is easy to translate jealousy into moral disapproval. To Mrs. Pomeroy Mrs. Else was "That woman!" She did not tone with Mrs. Pomeroy's social ambitions. She was neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring, or rather she was herring in the process of decay. Mrs. Else used aids to beauty. It was said that she dyed her hair, and rouged her face, and though art was considerably successful, it was not the kind of art that Southfleet could approve of. Only the Rahabs

of the world so blasphemed against Nature, though Nature might doom you to a red nose and a raddled skin, rusty hair, and uncompromising wrinkles. Sustenance of the spirit was permitted, but to cream and feed the skin was sinful.

Now, in reality Mrs. Else was a jocund, generous creature. She liked young things, and strange to say was not jealous of them. Having a young heart herself she understood the young. No moral shoe pinched her; her soul was without corns, her temper without wrinkles.

"You will not go out with that woman."

"She's not—that woman."

"Go upstairs at once and take your things off."

Mr. Slade was sitting with Mr. Truslove. It was a dull and cloudy day, and the balcony was not inviting. The two voices in conflict came from the landing, and both Mr. Truslove and Mr. Slade could hear all that was said.

"It's just—jealousy. You like saying 'no' and spoiling things."

"How dare you speak to me like this?"

"Because I——"

"Go upstairs at once to your room."

"I won't."

The answer to this defiance was a resounding smack. Mr. Truslove saw Mr. Slade start to his feet and make a movement towards the door. Then, he hesitated and stood still. His hands opened and shut, his knees trembled.

"I shouldn't, James, if I were you."

Mr. Slade turned about and looked at his friend. There was a sound of angry tears. Then, someone rushed hurriedly up the stairs. Mr. Slade sat down again, but he continued to tremble.

"It makes me——"

"Yes, I know. Some women like being—hags. I beg your pardon, James."

"You needn't, sir."

"Ah, she's shut her door, I think."

"Not yet. She has gone up after the girl."

"Has she? To lock her in, I expect. What a superstition, that you can lock youth up."

They sat in silence for a minute. Yes, Mrs. Pomeroy had been upstairs. They heard her flouncing down again, and the closing of her door.

"That means she has the key, James. And I have something."

"What?"

"Your secret, old man."

Mr. Slade sat very still. His mouth fell open. His eyes looked frightened.

"My—secret——?"

"Afraid so. But need you be afraid of me?"

Mr. Slade hid his face in his hands. There was silence.

"Cheer up, James."

"Do you think——?"

"What?"

"That anybody else knows?"

"Not a soul."

Mr. Slade uncovered a stricken face.

"No one must ever know. She—must never know."

"Why should she?"

"I was a desperate fool, John. You see, she—I mean Clara—was—ambitious and extravagant. I got into a mess. I tried to gamble myself out of it."

"And didn't."

"No. The disgrace—the shame. And she has never forgiven me. She is not that sort of woman. They gave me—— Oh, well, never mind."

"Poor old James. So, she——"

"Well, it was my penance. A sort of restitution."

"No, old man—crucifixion. Some women can be incredibly vindictive."

"I don't mind that. But the child. You see, I didn't know till I came here."

"Do you mean she never told you?"

"No."

"What a bitch!"

"No, don't say that, John. After all——"

"Yes, she had you absolutely, tied up and muzzled. Well, well, well, life can be a funny business."

Mr. Slade gave way to emotion, and wanting to be alone with it and to recover from it, he stepped out on to the balcony. So, his friend had guessed the truth, and was still his friend. Mr. Slade stood with his back against the wall, and looked at the trees and the sea. Why was Clara such a termagant? Why could she not grow old gracefully, and forget and forgive? Yet, Clara went to church, and knelt before her God. But what was her God? Social kudos and respectability? What a dreadful mess he had made of life! He was a traitor to his own child. He could not intervene to help Rose to be happy.

Mr. Slade's eyes were dim. Could people who were passing see his poor, silly, anguished face? He groped for a handkerchief and blew his nose. And then, as though he had trumpeted outside the walls of Jericho, the grey sky cracked, and a finger of light slanted down and touched the sea just where a ship was sailing. The canvas turned from grey to white like the wings of a celestial bird.

Mr. Slade held his handkerchief to his mouth and gazed. Had God given him a sign from heaven?

James Slade stepped back into the room. His face looked all smoothed out.

"Forgive me, sir, for being such a——"

Mr. Truslove put out a hand.

"Come here you dear old idiot. I suppose you think you are disgraced for life?"

"I was tempted and I fell, John. I did wrong—I did wrong to people who trusted me. It was right that I should suffer."

"But not for ever and ever, James. No God who is worth His salt asks for that. Sit down and read me something from the

Great Book. If I had lived as good a life as you have lived since I have known you, I should feel sure——”

“Sure of what, John?”

“That I had a claim on—happiness.”

3

What was Mrs. Pomeroy's ambition of the moment? That the Hallards and the Gages should call upon her, particularly the Hallards. But could such a social event be expected to happen so long as she was merely the proprietress of a private hotel, and poised precariously between the arm-chair of gentility and the stool of commerce? Yet, she could claim to be a gentlewoman, a daughter of the professional classes, and all that was needed was that her stone should be transferred to a different setting, gold not silver. She was accumulating property, and the goodwill of her hotel and its equipment would be worth a considerable sum. All that might be required was a new atmosphere.

Of course it would be possible for her to abandon Southfleet and retire to a new world, but her motto was that of Cæsar, *Veni, vidi, vici*. Her interests were in Southfleet, and maybe her passion was to conquer it, to convince her neighbours that she was very much Pomeroy. Had not the original Pomeroy possessed a castle and an estate in Devon?

Yet, even Mrs. Pomeroy could not ignore the human factors. She had made herself responsible for them, and sometimes when she reflected upon them she began to question the wisdom of her enslavement of poor silly James Slade. Had she not been a little hasty in her chastening of the man who had failed her? James Slade might become a social embarrassment. Either she would have to rid herself of him, or keep him so chained and muzzled that he would never betray the skeleton in the cupboard.

Then—there was Rose.

Mrs. Pomeroy had very definite plans for her daughter. She was to be everything that a young lady should be, disciplined, de-

mure, tastefully but not loudly dressed, correct in her behaviour, especially so in the presence of men. Rose was to be both Southfleet's heiress and beauty. She could be the most coveted bride in the neighbourhood, just sufficiently aloof and cold to pique the male, and particularly a Hallard. Mrs. Pomeroy spoke of the Hallards with very definite emphasis on the H, almost as though she was not sure of her aspirates. Hector Hallard. What a test of culture was that!

Yet, Rose was not proving so docile as her mother wished. She had a bright colour and a hot temper. Her intuitive response to the maternal decalogue was apt to be rebellious. There was too much of "I will" in Rose, and Mrs. Pomeroy should have remembered that Rose was her daughter. Had she not in her own youth flouted parental decretals? There was that woman Else, just the wrong sort of person for Rose to associate with, silly and frivolous and sentimental, oh yes and more than that. Mrs. Else was a honey-pot.

Reflecting upon these problems Mrs. Pomeroy received an inspiration. It was not a very nice inspiration, but it might prove effective. Silly Mr. Slade might be put to other uses. Should Rose show herself recalcitrant would it not be possible to confront her with her father and his past? "My dear, if you do not obey me, I think I can spoil any romance for you. There would be no Hallard, no Gage, not even a Richmond for you were the world to know that old Slade is your father, and that he spent seven years in gaol." Yes, it was an idea! Mrs. Pomeroy did not appear to appreciate the sinister effect of casting such a shadow. As Mr. Truslove had said, she was cast-iron.

Mrs. Else was the first person to be dealt with, and a woman has ways of impeaching another woman's charm.

"My dear, I don't wish you to think me narrow-minded, but you do not know as much of the world as I do. I don't want you to be subjected to bad influences. Some people are bad for one."

Rose tried to defend Mrs. Else.

"You're not fair to her, mother."

"My dear Rose, I am more interested in being fair to you. I don't think you understand what Mrs. Else's reputation is. The real people won't know her, and I want you to know the real people."

"But—she——"

"Mrs. Else is an immoral woman. Yes, my dear, don't look shocked. You are too young and innocent to understand some things. It is my duty to defend you from being associated with such a person. A young woman has to be so careful. It simply does not do to get a spotted reputation."

"I'm sure she's not——"

"Believe me, I know. Have you ever met her at the Hallards' or at Dr. Richmond's? Do you think Mrs. Richmond would allow her son to go trapesing about with Mrs. Else? Of course not. I am advising you for your own good."

Such reasoning may seem so final to a parent. Dislike a particular person and some solemn slander may appear abundantly justified. But Rose was puzzled and troubled. Mrs. Else was such fun. She was yea not nay to youth. She had such a jolly laugh. She was generous and affectionate. She admired Rose and told her so. She was interested in Rose's clothes. Whatever her mother might say, Mrs. Else was the best-dressed woman in Southfleet.

Why should one not like what one liked? There seemed to be a strange God sneaking about the world, pouncing upon you when you were happy, and if you liked chocolates forbidding you with dreadful solemnity to consume them.

If life and its strange anomalies was tantalizing Rose, Mr. Slade was equally provoked. If he had served his seven years for Rachel could he not in all sobriety love this other Rachel when she most needed it? Was not a little innocent guile justifiable? If Clara claimed his body in servitude, was the spirit to be included? Mr. Slade was moved to conspire with

himself, and with Mr. Truslove. Mr. Truslove made it known that Miss Rose would always be welcome as a visitor, and so she became one. Meanwhile, Mr. Truslove's heart appeared to be more sure of itself, and he was able to potter out in Caroline Gardens, and sit on one of the terrace seats in the sun.

The conspiracy between these two old men was fraught with understanding. It was understood that Mr. Slade should go forth and pilot Mr. Truslove back to the hotel and up the stairs to his room. Mr. Slade did so, and often to find Rose sitting on the seat with his friend. A high holly hedge screened it from the hotel windows.

Mr. Truslove would assume a playful naughtiness.

"Ha, James, you old tyrant! Come to fetch me in, have you? Well, I'm not going in just yet."

"Just as you feel, sir."

"I'm going to toddle up and down for five minutes. Exercise is good for the heart. You sit down and talk to Miss Rose."

Mr. Slade sat down, and Mr. Truslove pattered off, not to return immediately, but to squat on another seat at the far end of the terrace. After all, you could not forbid an old crock to settle on a shelf when it had rolled a hundred yards with a cracked heart!

Timidly and with trepidation Mr. Slade played for his daughter's confidence. How was *Lorna Doone* progressing? Rose, with a faint frown on her forehead, appeared to have passed out of the *Lorna Doone* phase. Life seemed to be baffling all those natural impulses; she was being too tightly laced up in the conventions.

"I ought to be going."

"Don't hurry, my dear."

"Mother will be fussing."

Mr. Slade wanted to say, "Let her fuss." What he did say was, "Growing up isn't easy."

Rose, with her chin tilted, considered that statement.

"No, it isn't. When you want to do a thing someone always seems to discover that it is wrong to do it."

"Not always or everybody."

Rose gave him an oblique and questioning glance.

"Why must one be treated like a child? I'm not a child any longer."

"No, my dear, but fathers and mothers seem to feel so responsible."

"They don't understand one's growing up. Is that it?"

"I think so."

"But you do."

Mr. Slade blinked at the sun.

"Perhaps. You see—I'm an old fellow. One has to learn to make allowances and be patient."

"Patient! I hate patience."

"Yes, my dear, I know. One grows out of patience, and then—perhaps—grows into it again. We can't always do just what we want to do, or all at once."

"Do you do just what you want to do?"

"No, my dear. And it might not be good for me."

"What—do—you want to do?"

Mr. Slade gave a little apologetic laugh.

"Well, if you must know, I should like to keep a toy-shop."

"A toy-shop?"

"Yes."

"I think that's a lovely idea."

XII

I

WINTER had come, and the little gardens of Caroline Terrace were all tucked up under their brown blankets, and Southfleet shivered when the east wind blew. Or a south-

west gale tearing across the estuary would set windows bubbling and smirch the horizon with a wet grey gloom. There were wild days when rolled towels had to be tucked along window-sills to soak up the rain. The solid holly hedges shook and shivered. Chimneys snored. Windows and doors rattled, and carpets bulged up from floors.

This bitter weather was not kind to Mr. Truslove, and tended to bring on those heart pangs. He felt the cold. A fire was kept burning in his room, and Mr. Slade laboured up and down with scuttles of coal. It seemed to be nothing but coal, coal, coal, and grubbing in a coal-cellar which was like a clammy vault. Miss Popham had a fire in her room, for she was subject to bronchitis; Mrs. Pomeroy also had a fire. In fact, Mr. Slade had six fires to attend to, and the blessed things kept him busy.

Yet, he managed to wake at night, and grope his way upstairs with a candle, and keep Mr. Truslove's fire going. He made as little noise as possible, but Mr. Truslove was a light sleeper, and he would wake and discover that kneeling figure trying to deposit lumps on the fire with a pair of tongs that wobbled.

"Hallo, James, stoking the furnace."

"I'm afraid I——"

"No, I was awake and lying doggo, watching you trying to handle those damned tongs."

"I'm afraid I dropped a lump."

"Or they did. You don't drop bricks, James."

Mr. Truslove raised himself in bed and reached for the glass.

"James, does it ever occur to you that I am being damned selfish?"

Mr. Slade was coaxing another lump of coal on to the fire.

"No, but——"

"Why should you get out of a warm bed at two in the morning to cosset an old corpse?"

"Don't say that. I hope when the good weather comes you will be better."

"Tell me, James, how do you manage to wake up?"

"I bought an alarm clock, and I set it for two."

"I ought to pay for that clock."

"No, it's quite a friend of mine—now."

"Do you manage to get to sleep again?"

"Quite easily."

"Blessed by a clear conscience."

Christmas was near, and Mr. Slade's overcoat was showing signs of wear, nor was it a very warm garment. He put it on at night when he ascended from the basement to attend to Mr. Truslove's fire.

"Is that your best overcoat, James?"

"Yes."

"Well, you go and buy a new one for a Christmas present. A good one, mind you: nothing shoddy."

"It's very kind of you, John."

"Fudge. If ever I was in anybody's debt I'm in yours."

Mr. Slade went shopping. He felt as Charles Dickens felt about Christmas. He liked to see the turkeys and sausages hanging and the great rounds of beef in the butchers' shops. He flattened his nose against the grocers' windows to gaze at the coloured candles, the crackers, the oranges, the pies and bottles of mincemeat. Mr. Golightly's drapery shop was gay with sprays of holly and red paper roses set in white cotton-wool. But where was the toy-shop, the local Lowther Arcade, dedicated solely to the children? It did not exist. Miss Mercer's stationery and book-shop did display a few toys, dolls and dolls' tea-services, two or three boxes of soldiers, but to Mr. Slade's mind the display was not adequate. He wandered up the street, and paused opposite the old white house with its green veranda—The Cedars—and gazed across at the barber's shop where monthly he had his hair cut. That particular niche would just have suited him. It was a funny little red house squeezed in between a greengrocer's and a chemist's. Mr. Babcock the

barber was a delicate old fellow with a chronic cough who was always talking of retiring from business. Some day the place might be to let, but what was the use of dreaming of toys and children when your savings in the Post Office Savings Bank amounted to thirty-three pounds, seven shillings and twopence?

Mr. Slade purchased his overcoat at Mr. Chignell's. It was a nice black coat with a velvet collar. Mr. Slade took it home with him and, carrying it upstairs to No. 1, displayed it with pride to Mr. Truslove.

"I shall feel quite a gentleman, John."

"James, my friend—you—are—a gentleman."

2

The Caroline Hotel celebrated Christmas—with moderation. Mrs. Pomeroy gave the gardener two shillings for holly trimmings from the gardens. Mistletoe did not appear above-stairs, but it was in evidence below, hanging from a gas bracket, after Mrs. Pomeroy had made her daily round and reascended the kitchen stairs. Mr. Slade said nothing about the two or three supposed brothers who slipped in after dark, and with giggles and mock struggles saluted the members of the staff. In fact Mr. Slade himself subscribed to the ancient ritual, beginning with Eliza, and ending with Jane.

"Oo-er, Dad, fancy you——!"

"Well, my dear, Christ is born. A happy Christmas to all of us."

Mrs. Pomeroy and her guests dined on roast beef and Christmas pudding; with custard and dessert. Mince pies were an alternative, save for the first floor who could demand both pudding and pie. The feast ended with a box of cheap crackers, and two bottles of prime port presented by Mr. Truslove. Mr. Truslove took his dinner upstairs with a half-bottle of port for himself, and Mr. Slade.

"Bring up two glasses, Jimmy."

"I've not finished yet——"

"Well, come up later and drink wine with me."

Mr. Slade had put on a black coat and a white tie for the occasion. It was a very decorous dinner. Mr. Slade saw to it that Rose had two helpings of pudding, plus a mince pie. She was in white and looking, Mr. Slade thought, very lovely. The crackers and the port produced a sober animation. Mr. Slade closed the door upon it, and was about to descend to his own dinner, when a figure in white slipped out of the room.

Rose had a cracker in her hand.

"Pull one with me, Mr. Slade."

They pulled, and the prize half of the cracker remained with Mr. Slade, but he surrendered it to his daughter.

"Yours, my dear, and may the motto be all that it should be."

It would appear that Rose remained in the hall to read her motto, for Mr. Slade had reached the first floor landing when he heard the opening and the closing of the dining-room door, and Mrs. Pomeroy's voice.

"How dare you make an exhibition of yourself like that? Running out to pull a cracker with a—servant."

Rose might have retorted that even servants were human and useful. What she actually said was that Mr. Slade was more than a servant.

"That is for me to judge," said her mother. "What have you got there?"

"Just a motto."

"Give it to me. Reading nonsense like that!"

"I will read it to you, if you like, mother. 'Her face is sweet, her eyes are blue. For her my love is strong and true.'"

Mrs. Pomeroy made a sound of scorn.

"Rubbish! Go in and pull crackers with Miss Popham and Mr. Sawkins."

"May I have a glass of wine, mother?"

"Certainly not."

Mr. Slade, softly opening Mr. Truslove's door, crept in and closed it.

"Well, James, how is the party going?"

"With authority, sir, with authority. Rose dared to pull a cracker with me, and was scolded."

"And why?"

"A young lady does not pull crackers with servants."

"Did—she—say that?"

Mr. Slade nodded, and Mr. Truslove eased himself up in bed.

"James, please take my compliments to Miss Pomeroy, and say that I would pull a cracker with her. Also, I have a little present ready. A glass of wine—too."

"That has just been forbidden, John."

"Damn it, does the woman think she is God!"

Mr. Slade, greatly daring and warmed by a glass of port, went below and delivered Mr. Truslove's message. The hotel had put on paper caps. Miss Popham wore a Britannic helmet, Mr. Sawkins a crown, Rose a red hood. Mrs. Pomeroy scorned such foolishness, even after a glass of Mr. Truslove's wine, but Mr. Truslove's invitation was accepted for Rose, for, if Mr. Truslove liked the girl so well, he might leave her a legacy in his will. Mrs. Pomeroy bent her head in acquiescence. She reminded Mr. Slade that his own dinner was waiting below-stairs, and that the hotel tables must be cleared by three o'clock.

"Very good, madam. I have to remove Mr. Truslove's tray."

There happened to be one cracker left, and Rose carried it upstairs, followed by Mr. Slade.

"Was the motto—as it should be, my dear?"

"Yes. But Mother did not approve of it."

"Mothers don't. At least—not always."

Mr. Truslove was ready for them.

"Ha, my dear, a happy Christmas and many of 'em. James, a glass of wine for Miss Pomeroy."

"Yes, sir."

"Now then for the cracker. Bless me if I haven't got the better half. How ungallant. Take it, my dear. That red hood suits you."

Rose unfolded another cap, another hood but blue.

"Try it on. Regular Dolly Varden. There's your wine, my dear."

"Mother said I wasn't to——"

"Uncle John says you can. Oh, James, open that upper right-hand drawer, and bring me the small parcel."

Mr. Slade produced the parcel and carried it to Mr. Truslove. Rose was sipping her wine and smiling at Mr. Truslove.

"There you are, my dear. Open it."

The parcel contained a morocco leather case, and when Rose raised the lid she saw an old paste necklace, the stones a soft blue, the setting—silver.

"Oh, how lovely! Is it really for me?"

"Who else? Put it on."

Rose had trouble with the catch, and Mr. Slade fastened it for her.

"Absolutely right for you, my dear. Look in the glass, and then come and kiss me."

But Rose gave him the kiss before going to the mirror.

"One—too—for our friend James."

Rose kissed Mr. Slade, and Mr. Slade, stirred by sudden emotion, remembered his dinner.

"I have to carve for the kitchen, sir. Will you excuse me?"

"Good God, James, haven't you dined?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Go to it. Miss Rose and I will have a chat."

3

The winter was passing, and crocuses were out in the garden. Mr. Slade had purchased the corms and planted them himself. It had been a long and a dastardly winter even for England, and Mr. Truslove was very weary of it, almost as weary as he was of this world. It had been too cold for him to go out, and any expedition taken downstairs entailed cluckings and flutterings of sympathy from Miss Popham and Miss Goodbody, or the sulky gloom of old Sawkins. Mr. Sawkins had inherited Mr. Truslove's

table in the corner near the fire. But Mr. Truslove was very tired of frosty or steaming windows, and the urgencies of the winter wind, and now and again he suffered from those agonizing seizures when his heart seemed gripped by an iron fist. Those blessed capsules relieved the pangs, but always there was feeling of bitter apprehension.

Said Mr. Truslove to his heart, "Why the devil don't you stop if you feel like that? I'm quite ready to go," but Mr. Truslove's heart persisted in beating.

Spring! Something revived in the tired old man, and when Mr. Slade brought him a pot of crocuses that he had been cherishing, Mr. Truslove's face lit up.

"You pretty things! Put 'em where I can see them, James."

"You'll soon be on the balcony, John."

"I'd like to feel the sun on me, old man, and hear the birds singing in the gardens."

"You soon will. Why shouldn't you have a bath-chair? I could take you out in it."

"More toil for you, James."

"But I'd like it. We could go up along the cliffs to the flag-staff. It's quite easy and flat there."

"And what would Mrs. P. say?"

"Would it matter? I shouldn't be so busy; no coal to carry up."

"Why not a carriage?"

"Why not! I could sit on the box, in case you wanted me."

"On the box?"

"Yes."

"Damn it, do you think I would let my best friend sit on the box while I wallowed down below, James?"

Mr. Slade made inquiries at Mr. Giggins' Cycle Shop and found that Mr. Giggins had a bath-chair for hire. It was fitted with pneumatic tyres, and travelled, as Mr. Giggins put it, "Like a bird". Mr. Slade could not conceive how any such contraption

could be compared to a bird, but he trundled the wheeled-chair away to be housed in one of the empty coach-houses in Caroline Mews. He appeared in Mr. Truslove's room, looking a little flushed and triumphant.

"I've got it, John."

"Got what?"

"A bath-chair. Pneumatic tyres, too."

"You old scoundrel!"

"Ask Dr. Richmond for his permisson. I can manage an hour each afternoon."

Dr. Richmond gave his permisson, provided that Mr. Truslove played no tricks, and took his capsules with him, so, on the first warm day, Mr. Slade trundled the chair round from the Mews, put a rug and a cushion in it, helped Mr. Truslove on with his overcoat and armed him down the stairs. They met Miss Popham in the hall.

"Dear me, are you going out?"

Wasn't that obvious!

"Oh, a bath-chair! How very nice. Can't I help to push it?"

Mr. Truslove looked grim.

"That is a thing I could not allow a lady to do. It would spoil my—sense of chivalry."

They escaped from Miss Popham, and Mr. Slade tucked Mr. Truslove into the chair.

"Let's get going, James, or that damned woman——"

"I'm sure she meant it kindly, sir."

"No, James, she wanted to exhibit herself as a sweet angel. The devil take such angels. They have driven more men to sin than——"

"Tut-tut, John, you must not get——"

"Peevish? Well, I won't."

Mr. Slade took the steering handle and pulled. The chair ran easily, and Mrs. Richmond, standing on her balcony, watched the procession pass, and waved to Mr. Truslove. Mr. Truslove raised his hat to her, but Mr. Slade was absorbed in playing the

patient ass. He guided the chair between the posts at the end of the terrace and, coming to the edge of the path, turned the handle for Mr. Truslove to hold while he went to the back and eased the chair down into the wide roadway between the row of houses and the cliff.

"Gently does it, James."

"Are you quite comfortable?"

"Very. You push, James, I can steer. Gives me something to do."

They took the path that wound along the edge of the cliff. A soft south-west breeze was blowing, and the broad estuary went glittering in the sunlight to the sea. The distant Kentish coast was silver-hazed. A barge with red sails was beating up towards the river.

"This is life, James."

"Enjoying it, John?"

"Rather."

Mr. Slade pushed the chair as far as the flag-staff and its white fence. He turned the chair here to face the sea. The gorse was in bloom, great banks of it, and Mr. Truslove spread his hands to the sun. A little below them and to the left a seat was visible, and two young people were sitting on it, and so absorbed in each other that they had not noticed the arrival of the chair. Rose Pomeroy and Hector Hallard!

Mr. Truslove turned his head.

"Hum! Hope we are not *de trop*, James."

Mr. Slade looked troubled.

"I think not. I wish——"

"What do you wish, James?"

"That it was Charlie Richmond, and not——"

"Yes, but one can't coerce—youth."

"I know. No use fussing."

Mr. Slade was able to watch his daughter in the part of the coquette. It was very natural coquetting, and Mr. Slade hoped that it was no more than that. He did not like young Hallard

or the way he sat with his arm along the back of the seat and leaning towards Rose. That arm might slip so easily round a waist. Conceited, over-confident young beggar, with those sleepily insolent eyes of his! The Hector Hallards of this world could never be satisfied with the love of one woman. They were promiscuous. But, after all, most men were like that, though some were more loyal in defying the temptation. Young Hallard was in love with himself in woman; Charlie Richmond might love the woman.

"They seem pleased with each other, James."

"He's not the man for her."

"I wonder if her mother thinks as you do?"

Mr. Slade's hands clenched themselves.

"Snobbery, John, I'm afraid."

Then, Mr. Slade saw young Hallard's arm slip down from the back of the seat with a suggestive movement, and suddenly Mr. Slade cleared his throat rather loudly. Rose looked round and up and saw them. She blushed, and her eye-lids flickered.

Mr. Truslove raised his hat, and Miss Pomeroy, rising, came up the path towards them. Young Hallard, twisting round, gave the two old gentlemen an insolent stare. Damn the old fools! He too got on his feet, but he did not follow Rose, but walked off down the path with his hands in his pockets.

"Rather evidential—that," said Mr. Truslove. "Gentlemen don't run away."

"But cads do," thought Mr. Slade.

XIII

I

MR. SLADE trundled Mr. Truslove home, wondering whether he would be the recipient of an appeal from Rose. "Please don't tell Mother."

Mr. Slade was so absorbed in his own reflections that he very nearly ran Mr. Truslove into the cliff railings.

"Look out, James!"

Mr. Slade gave a gasp.

"Sorry, John."

"Other preoccupation, what!"

Now, if Rose appealed to him to keep a secret should he try to hint to her that young Hallard was other than he seemed? Such interference might prove an indiscretion. Perhaps it would be wiser to watch and wait, and trust to Charlie Richmond to defeat Lothario. But Mr. Slade received no appeal from Rose. She was wise as to her mother's predilections.

"Where have you been?"

"Oh, just for a short walk on the cliffs with Hector. He thinks he will get his blue up at Cambridge."

"Indeed. And what for?"

"Rowing, mother. He was in the college Lent boat, and they were head of the river."

This might be Double-Dutch to Mrs. Pomeroy, but her secret prides and prejudices were flattered. When she took Highfield House no doubt the Hallards would call upon her, and she was approaching the Highfield elevation.

The staff took its tea at half-past five, and Mr. Slade entered the kitchen not suspecting that the matter which was worrying him was to be quickened by kitchen gossip. It was May who started it, and May had a sister who served as housemaid with the Hallards, and May's sister—Kitty—was a comely wench with mischief in her laughing eyes.

Someone mentioned the Hallard household.

"Poo," said May. "I know a thing or two about them."

This was a challenge to the communal curiosity, and May had to produce evidence.

"The old man goes to bed squiffy every other night."

Eliza was not impressed. "There were days when you weren't a gentleman unless you went to bed squiffy—every night."

"Coo, that's not everythin'," and May tilted her head cheekily.

"You seem to know a lot, my girl."

"I do, that. Young Hector's 'ot stuff. Tried to get Kitty t' go out with 'im after dark on her evenin' out."

"And did she?"

"You bet she didn't. Kitty's up to snuff. She was goin' out with 'er chap. Besides, young Hector's always after one of the girls, messin' somebody about. 'E's a trouble-maker, if you like! Randy as——"

Eliza protested.

"I won't have such words in my kitchen. Before Mr. Slade, too. 'Tain't decent."

Mr. Slade had been sitting in silence, stirring his tea, and looking bothered.

"Thank you, Mrs. Eliza. The young man may be wild——"

"Wild! A girl don't mind a little mischief, but 'e's the nasty, sneaking sort. Get you into trouble and then say it was——"

"May," said Mrs. Eliza, "I won't have this sort of ignorant talk in my kitchen. You've shocked Mr. Slade."

"'Ave I, Dad?"

Mr. Slade's eyes were on his plate.

"Well, yes, my dear, I don't like——"

"Sorry, Dad. All the same if I were Mrs. P. I wouldn't let——"

"My girl," said Mrs. Eliza very sharply, "you stop it. Nasty, scand'lous insinoo-ations."

"Come, come," said Mr. Slade, "we are all human, but I must say I agree with Mrs. Eliza."

Eliza preened herself: her bosom swelled, her eyebrows bristled.

"Any gentleman would. Have another cup of tea, Mr. Slade."

But Mr. Slade was troubled. A girl's mischievous gossiping could be evidential, for in a little town like Southfleet everything and much more than everything was known. The kitchen-maid may have embroidered her story and over-spiced her scandal,

but the taste of it left Mr. Slade with a sour mouth. Young Hallard looked the part. He might have been one of Jane Austen's handsome, persuasive blackguards, just a Georgian, though much of the Georgian morality has been maligned. No, the pose of the Regency buck portrayed itself in young Hallard, for the pose had survived the Victorian frost in certain of the country families. And, after all, it was just insurgent youth, vividly sexed, selfish, claiming a primitive prerogative. Such a household as the Hallards' might equip a young man with the superficial attributes of the gentleman, in dress, in speech, in easy manners, while leaving him the essential cad, completely without compassion.

Oh, yes, tradition! But what sort of tradition? The atmosphere of the first five years when a child absorbed those sensitive, spiritual essences, faith in someone, a sense of integrity, a feeling that certain things mattered. So, to Mr. Slade, a child of the Richmond breed would be other than a nicely-painted young savage of a Hallard household. Sound timber, sound rigging, a wholesome cargo, the mother-god behind the young god at the wheel.

James Slade knew that he had made a mess of his own marriage. He had married a comely wench with a fine head of hair and a merciless mouth. He did not want his daughter to be lured by biology into making a second mess of marriage. Or—worse! Hadn't Clara any sense, or was she just the hopeless snob?

Mr. Slade took his troubles to Mr. Truslove.

"What would you do about it, John?"

Mr. Truslove grimaced. His heart was giving trouble.

"Not much, Jimmy. One is so much a spectator at such a show. I suppose you would like to stage a fight between the hero and the villain."

"I would," said Mr. Slade.

"And if the hero licked the villain you might find the heroine wiping the villain's nose, and calling the hero a beast and a bully."

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Reverse the result, James, and the heroine might think the hero a poor thing. A woman's prejudices go with liking."

Mr. Slade looked sad.

"It does seem a pity that appearances should be so—treacherous."

"Isn't it a question of the senses, especially with the young?"

"It seems so."

"Didn't you——?"

"Yes, I did, John. I was a sentimental fool."

"The lure of the Golden Fleece, old man."

But Mr. Truslove was looking distressed. His hand went to his heart. His eyes were apprehensive.

"I think I'll have a capsule, James."

Mr. Slade was all contrition.

"How selfish of me! Worrying you."

He broke a capsule into a clean handkerchief, and passed it quickly to his friend.

"Disgraceful selfishness. I'm sorry."

Mr. Truslove lay back in his chair and breathed in that blessed vapour.

"Not for yourself, James. Ah, that's better. After all, there is something in science."

2

Charles Richmond was home for the holidays. He was a monitor at school, and playing for the 1st Fifteen. The next term would be his last, for Dr. Richmond was entering his son at Guy's Hospital. And Charles was out of the lout stage and taking life and himself very seriously. He had a young dignity of his own, and a pleasant, open, freckled face. Silence had descended upon him. He was a lad who, when asked a question, became grave and deliberate before answering it.

Dr. Richmond and his son passed along Caroline Terrace together each morning on the way to the surgery where Charles would watch his father deal with some of the club patients. Also,

Mr. Byng, his large moustache turning white, taught Mr. Charles the elements of dispensing, and the mysteries of the Day Book. Dr. Richmond was a believer in an early familiarity with the life you were to live. Moreover, in loving his work, and being a man upon whom other men relied in desperate cases, he felt that he could pass to his son some of that actual wisdom and craftsman's cunning that are not to be culled from books. Charles had made his own choice; he would follow his father, and Charles was a lad who did not think his father an obsolete old fool, or resent being taught the things his father knew. There was affection and understanding between them. Dr. Richmond had been no potted saint; he did not preach, or talk down to his son.

With the work done Charles would take a boat and scull furiously up to the Crowstone or out and round the end of the pier. He had fine shoulders and a well-set head, a passion for fitness and a heart that was in training. Or he would get on his bicycle and scorch up hill and down hill with the gay determination of youth that will not be passed on the road. This bicycling business and this sea-craft gave Mr. Slade an idea. Young Hallard, like so many sensualists, was a dilettante, a loungeur. If Rose took to wheels, might she not be lured into liking the man of action better than the young elegant who cultivated a nice crease in his trousers?

Mr. Slade spoke to Mr. Truslove of his inspiration.

"If I give you the money, John, will you make her the present? I can't."

"One moment, Jimmy, you have forgotten the mother. Does social ambition include bloomers?"

"She need not wear bloomers, John."

"But you may commit one. Also, she may ride off with the villain."

Mr. Slade fingered his chin.

"Yes, that's true. But could you sound Mrs. P.?"

"Why not? Tell her, James, I wish to see her."

Mrs. Pomeroy, receiving the invitation to visit Mr. Truslove

in his bed-sitting-room, immediately suspected the preparation of a complaint. Such was her financial position and the pride of a confident security that she was rising above the need for compromise. Should her clients become critical they could be told to go elsewhere, so Mrs. Pomeroy entered Mr. Truslove's room in a spirit of non possumus. She was prepared to refuse anything to anybody.

Her daughter ride a bicycle! That was quite impossible. Mrs. Pomeroy profoundly disapproved of young gentlewomen doing any such thing. She did not say that she thought it indecent, but she did believe that it was bad social strategy. A young gentleman's legs were for walking, not pedalling ridiculously along country roads. One had to think of a young gentlewoman's dignity.

She thanked Mr. Truslove. Of course his offer was most kindly meant, but she could not agree to it. Her daughter was too delicate for such strenuous exercise. Complexion might suffer and sex allure be lost by wearing such ridiculous clothes. Mrs. Pomeroy believed in the petticoat and the veil, and the mystery which is supposed to associate itself with the concealment of legs.

"No go, Jimmy. I'm afraid the lady was shocked."

"I should have known it," said Mr. Slade.

"But I have another idea."

"Have you?"

"Why shouldn't I give a tea-party for the young on my balcony?"

"Wouldn't it tire you, John?"

"I'll risk that. I'll send Master Charles an invitation through his father. When that is settled, we can invite Miss Pomeroy."

"Without her knowing that Charles——?"

"Quite so."

The plan was put into action, but Mr. Truslove's party did not prove a success. Charles was the first of the two guests to appear on the balcony. Mr. Slade had smuggled him upstairs

without Mrs. Pomeroy's intervention, and had gone below to prepare the Truslove tea. For some reason which did not appear young Richmond was in a difficult mood, inarticulate and self-conscious. When someone knocked at Mr. Truslove's door, and Mr. Truslove sent Mr. Charles to welcome the visitor, a silent blight descended upon both young things.

"Hallo, Rose!"

"Oh, you're here?"

"Seems so. Mr. Truslove is on the balcony."

Then there was silence. Rose crossed the room and appeared before Mr. Truslove, who half rose from his long chair to welcome her.

"Glad to see you, my dear. Sit down there. Tea will be up in a minute."

Rose sat down upon her dignity. Young Richmond lingered. He was standing—irresolute—upon Mr. Truslove's hearthrug. Should he go out to the balcony, or should he bolt? Well, one could not do that sort of thing to one of the pater's best patients. Besides, Mr. Truslove was a decent old sort. Charles, hands in pockets, stepped out on to the balcony and, leaning against the railings, appeared interested in everything but Rose. And that was how Mr. Slade found them, Rose making bright conversation with Mr. Truslove, Charles very much the *tertium quid*, and looking as though he were waiting to squash some opposing "Half" behind the scrum.

"Tea, sir."

"Bring a table out, James."

Charles bestirred himself to take the table from Mr. Slade.

"Where will you have it, sir?"

"Here, Charles. That's it. Rose can sit with her back to the wall, and you just there."

But both young things appeared to have their backs towards each other against a most unmelting wall. Rose, who had recovered her animation, bestowed the whole of it on Mr. Truslove. Had not Mr. Truslove lived in China? Yes, he had.

How exciting! She—Miss Pomeroy—would love to travel all over the world like the ships which passed down the estuary. No, she did not want to spend her life in Southfleet. The people were so dull, and they never went anywhere save to the Dukeries and the Lakes and Devon. Miss Pomeroy's face had a pretty flush. The flirts of her head and her smiling eyes were all for Mr. Truslove. She ignored Charles Richmond, and Charles was stubbornly dumb.

Mr. Truslove attempted to bring Charles into the conversation. He tried to talk football. Where was Charles's place on the field? A forward. The school fifteen was pretty hot stuff, wasn't it?

"Oh, so-so," said Charles, munching cake.

Had Charles seen England play the New Zealanders?

Yes, he had. Rather a rotten game. Some of the New Zealanders had lost their tempers and walked off the field, and one had—— Charles remembered himself abruptly and smothered a picturesque but coarse incident. He did not look at Rose.

Miss Pomeroy said brightly that she preferred rowing to football.

Charles was churlish enough to ask her where she had ever watched any first class rowing. But she had him. She had seen last year's Oxford and Cambridge race. Cambridge had rowed beautifully.

"And been licked after leading at Barnes," said Charles.

"They were leading when I saw them. Hector Hallard says they would have won only one of the men had influenza."

Charles's young face grew grim.

"Hallard rows a bit."

"He is going to get his Blue."

"He hasn't the stuff for that."

Mr. Truslove hurriedly changed the conversation, but though he managed to lead it into less controversial quarters, he could not make it either spontaneous or gay. Youth was very much at cross-purposes. Rose gave her face and her attention wholly to

her host, and Charles sat stolidly in the background. Presently he began to fidget and, glancing surreptitiously at his watch, asked Mr. Truslove to excuse him.

"I have some reading to do, sir, and then surgery."

"Mustn't interfere with your work, Charles," said Mr. Truslove, feeling both platitudinous and tired.

"Thank you, sir. Good-bye, sir."

He carried his broad shoulders and his virile head through the french windows with a casual glance at Rose.

"Oh, if you see Hallard, tell him I'll scull him to the end of the pier and back any day he likes."

"I'm afraid he wouldn't think it worth while."

Mr. Truslove's face creased itself into a whimsical smile. So, this was the result of attempting to stimulate romance!

"Nice lad—that," he said to Miss Pomeroy.

"I think he is much too conceited."

Mr. Truslove decided to disagree with her.

"No, my dear, I differ. Too sensitive. When you are not conceited enough you may put on airs."

Miss Pomeroy was politely and unconsentingly silent.

Mr. Slade, appearing half an hour later to clear away the tea, found Mr. Truslove alone, and lying flaccid, with closed eyes.

"No luck, James. Ye gods, but these young things can be exhausting."

XIV

I

IT was about two o'clock in the morning when Mr. Slade became dimly aware of some insistent sound. Sleep had not come to him easily, for he had felt worried about Rose, but his ultimate slumber had been profound. A dream had preceded his waking. Someone had been beating a gong in a strange place,

half prison, half temple, and from a window of coloured glass Charles Richmond's face had grimaced at him. Mr. Slade sat up sharply, rubbing his eyes like a child. Had he been dreaming, or had some actual sound been beating urgently upon his eardrums? A bell? Mr. Truslove's bell? Mr. Slade slipped out of bed, groped for the matches and lit his candle. He put on his overcoat, opened the door, and glanced at the row of bells. All of them were silent and motionless. But had his friend been ringing? Mr. Slade was moved to sudden action. He must satisfy himself that the sound that had roused him had been no more than the illusion of a dream.

He hurried up the stairs, carrying his candle. He knocked softly at Mr. Truslove's door. There was no answer. Oh, well, it must have been nothing but a dream. But Mr. Slade was not satisfied. Very gently he turned the handle, opened the door, and put his head inside.

A night-light was burning beside the bed, its little flame standing still and steady. Mr. Truslove liked to have a light at night. Mr. Slade saw a dim face on the pillow, and more than that. The clothes had been pushed down into a rumpled disorder, and Mr. Truslove's hands seemed to be clutching something white. James Slade was conscious of a sudden, poignant fear. He opened the door wide, and crossed quietly towards the bed. He looked at his friend's face; it was still and blanched, yet retaining a staring, twisted anguish. And then he saw another thing. The box of capsules had been overturned, and its contents scattered on the floor. Mr. Truslove's hands were clutching the useless handkerchief.

The candlestick rocked in James Slade's hand. He knew now that the ringing of the bell had been no mere dream. His friend, in the anguish of those heart-pangs, had clutched at the string. Yes, and the string had broken; Mr. Slade saw it hanging down the wall. Then, a fumbling hand, groping for those precious capsules, had overturned the open box and scattered them.

John Truslove was dead.

James Slade's hand grew steadier, though his face was all puckered up.

"Oh, John, I've failed you."

The profundity of the shock had paralysed him for the moment. Then, as he stood gazing, he became aware of a gradual transformation spreading over his dead friend's face. The lines of anguish melted away; it became peaceful, calm, save for the widely open eyes. James Slade watched and wondered. Then, bending down, he closed Mr. Truslove's eyes, and again stood gazing at him.

"John, God is with you. Peace, perfect peace."

Setting the candlestick on the table James Slade knelt down beside the bed. One of his hands clasped the dead man's hands, the other covered his own face. So James Slade prayed—"Our Father which art in Heaven——"

For ten minutes or more he remained upon his knees. The realization of that which he had lost came to him gradually, and seemed to lay upon his shoulders an increasing weight of loneliness. His best friend had gone, the one man who knew his secret and understood his silence. John Truslove had helped to fill a void in James Slade's life. He had been able to give to him happy, affectionate service. There would be no more jokes between them, no chats upon the balcony, no more jaunts in the old bath-chair. James Slade was conscious of an acute emptiness both of the spirit and the belly. Something had gone from him.

He rose slowly from his knees. He smoothed out the rumpled bed-clothes, removed the handkerchief from one dead hand, and crossed Mr. Truslove's hands. They were growing cold, but a profound serenity had settled upon his dead friend's face. What now? Ought he to rouse Mrs. Pomeroy, and go out and ring Dr. Richmond's night-bell. What would be the use? Let them sleep. And suddenly Mr. Slade's feeling of emptiness became actually physical. There was a void in him that symbolized his sense of loss and of loneliness. He took his candle, closed the door and went downstairs, and exploring the larder, helped him-

self to bread and cheese, and sitting at the kitchen table, filled his sorrowful belly. No more trays would he carry upstairs. No more affectionate service. Who was the fool who had said that those who served were slaves?

Mr. Slade did not return to his bed. He made his way back to his dead friend's room, and sat down to mourn and to contemplate. He felt that he was keeping watch over his friend, and that somehow he was communicating with him. He sat there until the dawn showed in streaks of light along the curtain edges. Light! The sun! John Truslove had loved the light. Mr. Slade rose and drew back the curtains and pulled up the blind. He opened one of the french windows. Birds were singing. A peerless spring dawn was breaking.

Mr. Slade watched the sunrise. Then he turned about and, stealing across the room, blew out Mr. Truslove's night-light. So—life could be extinguished, but the sun was rising over the sea.

2

At half-past seven in the morning James Slade knocked at Mrs. Pomeroy's door.

"Are you awake, madam?"

"What's that?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news. Mr. Truslove passed away in the night."

Mrs. Pomeroy was sitting at her dressing-table combing her hair. She was proud of her hair, and she had a right to be proud of it. She was fond of telling people that she could sit on her tresses. The cynics might have said that this was no exception.

"What's that, Slade?"

"Mr. Truslove died in the night, madam."

Mrs. Pomeroy tweaked the comb from her hair. How annoying! People should not die in hotels. It was depressing for the other guests. Also Mr. Truslove had occupied No. 1 for a number of years, and had paid his bill regularly.

She got up, crossed the room, and opened the door.

"When did you discover it, Slade?"

"About two in the morning, madam. Mr. Truslove must have had one of his heart attacks. I heard his bell, but it was too late."

"And you did not inform me."

"I thought it unnecessary to disturb you."

"Indeed! I should have been informed—at once."

Mr. Slade was looking at his mistress with steady, childlike eyes. So, Clara was doing her hair just as he could remember her doing it in the old days. She had always been touchy when combing her hair. A rich soft fleece on a hard head. How deceptive things could be. And Clara was scolding him as of old when he had been slow in dressing and she had wanted the room to herself. She had wanted everything to herself.

"I am sorry, madam, but I wished—"

"It is my wishes that matter. Does Dr. Richmond know?"

"No."

"Really, Slade, how remiss of you. Have some sense, man. Go down at once and leave the news at Dr. Richmond's."

Mr. Slade passed down and out into the sunlight. He looked at the flowers in the garden. They had dewy faces. He glanced up at the green balcony, and realized that he had left the blinds up. Well—why not? And how was it that some people found fault with everybody and everything? Might it be that they had sore souls? Mr. Slade passed on towards Dr. Richmond's with a soft westerly breeze blowing in his face. His friend was dead, and that Jehovah in petticoats had scolded him.

Mr. Slade found a maid cleaning the doctor's doorstep. She was on all fours, her pretty and youthful posterior moulding a mauve cotton frock. Her supple waist bent to the movements of her body. Her white cap had a jaunty set, and she was humming to herself as she swabbed the step.

"Is the doctor up, Alice?"

Mr. Slade, being a humble person, seemed to know all and sundry by their Christian names. Alice rose on her knees and

turned to face her questioner, her swab in one hand, the other resting on the pail. She had soft brown eyes and soft brown hair. Lucy Richmond liked her maids to be of that quality.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Slade. No, I expect he's having his cold bath."

Mr. Slade glanced at the speaking-tube above the brass-handled bell-pull. The telephone had not yet become both a universal curse and a universal blessing.

"I wonder if I might speak up the tube, Alice?"

"Is it serious?"

"Yes, Mr. Truslove is dead."

The girl's soft eyes clouded. She was young, and death was nothing to her, and yet it was something on this lovely morning.

"Poor gentleman. Yes, you might."

"I don't want to step on your clean doorstep, Alice."

"I don't mind."

"But I do. Sweet tempers shouldn't be trodden on."

Mr. Slade edged to the side of the door and put his lips to the mouthpiece. He blew, and a whistle sounded beside the Richmond bed. Mrs. Richmond was at her dressing-table. She rose and walked to the dressing-room door.

"Someone at the speaking-tube, dear."

Dr. Richmond had stepped out of his round bath and was towelling himself.

"Can you take the message, Lucy?"

"Yes."

Mr. Slade, with his ear to the tube, heard Mrs. Richmond's gentle voice descending to him.

"Yes, who is that?"

"Slade, madam. I thought the doctor ought to know. Mr. Truslove died in the night."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," said the voice; "the doctor shall know at once."

Mr. Slade turned away, and Mrs. Richmond walked to the dressing-room door.

"Mr. Truslove is dead."

Dr. Richmond was slipping into his shirt.

"Dead? Damn! Poor old boy! I thought he would be good for another year or two."

Mr. Slade had just finished serving breakfast in the dining-room when he saw Dr. Richmond pass the window. The hotel dining-room was expressing its sympathy with correct and silent gloom, and Mr. Slade turned to the door to go and meet the doctor, but Mrs. Pomeroy's voice waylaid him.

"Slade."

"Yes, madam."

"Show Dr. Richmond up into my room."

"Yes, madam."

The hotel door stood open in sunny weather, and Dr. Richmond was laying his hat and gloves on the hall table.

"A bad business this, James."

"Very, sir."

"Especially to you."

"Yes, especially to me, sir. I shall miss him. He was my friend."

"How did it happen?"

"He must have had one of his attacks, sir. He upset the capsule box, and the bell cord broke. I did hear a bell in my dreams. But when I got upstairs—it was too late."

Mr. Slade's voice broke. He was feeling for his handkerchief.

"I can't forgive myself. If I had heard the bell—earlier——"

Dr. Richmond laid a hand on Mr. Slade's shoulder.

"James, you have nothing to regret. You were a great comfort to him, you know."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Slade blew his nose. Dr. Richmond had turned towards the stairs.

"Mrs. Pomeroy says, sir, will you go into her room."

Dr. Richmond made no reply, or rather—his response was inward. Damned, interfering female! And reaching the landing he turned towards Mr. Truslove's door, opened it, went in, and with a jerk of the head invited Mr. Slade to follow him.

"Shut the door, James."

The doctor noticed that the blinds were up, and that the morning sunlight was falling full upon the bed. It lit up the serene and marble face sleeping its last sleep, and the folded hands. Dr. Richmond crossed to the bed, and glanced at the broken cord and the scattered capsules. If there had been anguish here, all that had passed.

"He looks very much at peace, James."

"Yes, sir. No more pain."

"Those attacks could be very terrible. He will suffer no more."

There was a moist sound from Mr. Slade, and Dr. Richmond was careful not to look at him. They stood in silence. There was a flurry of skirts upon the landing. The door opened, and Mrs. Pomeroy sailed in. She looked at the sunlit windows; she frowned.

"Slade, pull down those blinds—at once. What can you have been thinking of? No respect."

Mr. Slade did not move, and it was Dr. Richmond who answered the lady.

"My patient loved the light, madam. Why deprive him of it now?"

"But my dear doctor, people will think?"

"Let them—think. What does it matter?"

3

Mr. John Truslove was buried in St. John's Churchyard in a quiet corner not very far from the resting place of a notable author who had given distinction to Southfleet by dying in the town. Sundry nephews and an aged aunt followed the coffin, the young men with hopes of pleasant legacies. Mrs. Pomeroy

was present with her daughter, also the hotel residents, and Dr. and Mrs. Richmond, and Mr. Grigson. James Slade, the most genuine mourner of them all, followed at the tail of the procession. He was the last person to pass round the open grave and look down into it, and to drop a little bunch of white rose-buds on to the oak coffin. The Rev. John Chatterway was walking away with the relatives and offering dry condolences, which, had he known it, were utterly superfluous.

Mr. Slade was not present at the reading of the will. He had work to do and he remained uninterested during the interview between Mr. Grigson and the relatives. Mrs. Pomeroy had surrendered her own private room for the affair but, happening to pass down the stairs, she overheard what appeared to be angry argument. So, the nephews, etc., were squabbling over the dead man's testament. One particular voice was so strident that she heard Mr. Grigson protest.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, remember the occasion. My client's will is in perfect order, and he was completely sane when he gave me his instructions."

"I shall contest it," said the voice.

"Shut up, Arthur," said another voice. "It strikes me that Uncle John had a sense of humour."

"Oh, yes, it's all right for you. But I'm not going to sit down and see all that money go to a——"

Mr. Grigson's voice grew more emphatic.

"May I say, young man, that you are showing a most unseemly and mercenary temper. The will is in perfect order. I shall advise the trustees to administer it—forthwith."

There was silence and Mrs. Pomeroy passed on down the stairs. So that mischievous old gentleman had been playing tricks with his money, and sundry young men had discovered that blood is not thicker than water.

XV

I

MR. SLADE was feeling sad.

He had received orders to pack up all his dead friend's belongings and to prepare the room for another occupant.

Mr. Sawkins was to inherit No. 1, and if James Slade disliked a human being it was Mr. Sawkins. His very name expressed the gentleman. Hawkins would have been good English—but Sawkins! Mr. Sawkins was bald, with a dirty grey beard which looked as though an egg had been broken on it. He had bulbous, light blue eyes, a mean little mouth, and a cold complacency that was incredible. Mr. Sawkins had been something at Somerset House and had retired on a pension. He possessed all the sour arrogance of some petty official to whom a little power had been accorded, and who, in the productive world, was just nothing. He liked to get two or three old ladies together and lecture them on very elementary science. He picked his teeth in public. He wore knobbly boots which retained a particular and unpleasant odour. Mr. Slade knew, for he had to clean those boots. His tips were mere minutiae. And here was Sawkins proposing to settle down in that room of many memories, and to display his false-teeth like precious ornaments in a tooth-glass on the mantelpiece. Those teeth seemed to grin at you as though they possessed a smug entity of their own.

Mr. Slade was folding up coats and trousers and laying them reverently in a trunk when Mr. Sawkins walked in.

"Not finished yet, Slade?"

"No, not yet."

"Hurry up, man. I want to move in to-morrow."

Why this unseemly haste? That death had been in the room seemed to cast no shadow therein for Mr. Sawkins. He was not sensitive to life's imponderables. The room had two french

windows, and one of them was shut. Mr. Sawkins crossed the room and opened it, sniffed the air, and stepped out on to the balcony. Mr. Slade could picture him sitting there, picking his teeth and making digestive noises.

"Oh, Slade."

"Sir?"

Mr. Sawkins was standing in the window. There were food stains on his waistcoat.

"I'll have the bed moved over there."

"Perhaps you will tell the maids," said Mr. Slade, "that is their business."

"You can tell them, Slade."

"I don't give orders to the staff, Mr. Sawkins."

Mr. Sawkins frowned and pursed up his little mean mouth.

"But you will take orders, Slade. Yes, I think so. Gentlemen have to be obeyed."

Gentlemen! Mr. Slade gave a caress to a pair of trousers. Could one feel Christlike to a creature like Sawkins? And his fate would be to wait upon Mr. Sawkins, clean his nasty boots, carry up his coal, and be admonished by the mean little mouth concealed in that egg-stained beard. Mr. Slade was puckishly reminded of the saying, "It's a dirty bird that fouls its own nest." He sighed. Well, perhaps all this was part of his penance? Mr. Sawkins would be his hairy shirt.

Mr. Sawkins stepped down from the window. Mr. Truslove's books were still arrayed in the bookcase. Mr. Sawkins picked out one at random. It was a Zola.

"Pah, did the old man read that filth?"

Mr. Slade's head jerked back. His eyes said: "Old man yourself, and a nasty one." But his retort was adequate. "In French, yes. I don't suppose you understand French, Mr. Sawkins. Mr. Truslove was a man of education."

Mr. Sawkins stared, and then shoved the book back on a shelf. Really, this fellow Slade was becoming peculiarly impertinent. He would have to be chastened.

Indeed, life bore heavily upon James Slade during the days following his friend's death. Mrs. Pomeroy was difficult, very difficult. Mr. Sawkins had complained to her of Slade's impertinence, and Mr. Slade was scolded. Did he think that he could give himself airs and graces just because Mr. Truslove had been too friendly with him? Mr. Truslove had only wanted someone to fuss over him, and Mr. Truslove was dead. Mr. Slade would be well advised to remember the position he was in, and reflect that if he failed to do his duty politely and with humility he might find himself dismissed, and that at his age fresh employment would be problematical.

Mr. Slade could not resist the lure of sarcasm.

"You mean—the Workhouse, Clara?"

"How dare you address me in that familiar way? Yes, that will be your end if you are not careful."

"Very good, madam."

Mr. Slade, going out to have his hair cut, happened to see Rose and Hector Hallard passing through the main gate of Caroline Gardens. The implication depressed him. Everything seemed to be wrong with his world. And in the High Street he found a gang of men engaged in murdering the great chestnuts of the timber-yard. The trees were mere mutilated stumps, and the yard was piled with withering foliage. More death!

Mr. Babcock's saloon was empty, and Mr. Babcock was reading the daily paper. He put it away, smiled his funny little dry smile, and rose to deal with Mr. Slade's hair. Mr. Babcock was in a chatty and a cheerful mood. As he draped Mr. Slade with the white sheet he told him jocularly that this would be the last occasion on which he would cut his hair.

"Retiring. Glad of it."

"What, and your place is to let?"

"It will be in a week or two."

"As a going concern?"

"If anybody wants it. But I'm not bothering about that. When I finish—I finish."

"But the good-will is worth something."

Mr. Babcock was a bit of an oddity. He said that when a thing had been yours for thirty years you might not wish to see some other fellow in possession. Almost it would be like passing your wife on to a stranger. As for the good-will, it was not what it had been. That new and more pretentious establishment in Victoria Road had been cutting into his custom.

"I've made my money, Mr. Slade, and I'm calling my tune. And I don't want to fob off some young chap with a business that is past its prime."

Mr. Slade approved of Mr. Babcock's honesty.

"There are other things than money."

"I should say so."

"If you have got a little money."

"Ah," said Mr. Babcock, "you can't afford to be proud unless you've some cash to carry it."

Mr. Slade became more silent and depressed. He passed out of Mr. Babcock's shop nicely shorn and oiled, but with a sense of frustration tantalizing him. If only——? He crossed the road, and standing by the high green gates of "The Cedars", looked longingly at that funny little old red house with its two small windows. He had dreamed of translating it into a toy-shop, but such fancifulness could be no other than a dream.

Was his world destined to be all boots, coal, Sawkins, and Clara?

2

Mr. Grigson had a very dry sense of humour, old Monopole at its best. He liked the bouquet of that particular brand of irony. How quickly family feuds developed when the beloved testator was dead, and all that remained were the pickings. Mr. Grigson had discovered that you never knew your clients until some will which concerned them was read. Black ties and black gloves shrivelled, and human cupidity popped up like a rabbit out of a conjurer's hat.

"Let me see," said Mr. Grigson to himself, "just a week has elapsed. He has shown no curiosity. No discreet feelers. He suspects nothing. Obviously he had no mercenary motives. Well, well, well! Mr. John Truslove did possess one disinterested friend."

Mr. Grigson sat down and wrote a letter. It was a very brief letter. He rang his bell, and instructed the clerk who entered to send the office-boy round with the letter to the Caroline Hotel.

Mr. Slade was cleaning silver when the door bell rang. He was not on duty, so there was no need for him to shed his apron and hurry into his alpaca coat. He heard Bertha run upstairs, and thought no more of it. He was not in a mood to think about anything, for there were times when thought was a pain.

Bertha came back down the stairs. She stopped outside Mr. Slade's door.

"Dad."

"Yes, my dear."

"A letter for you."

Now, never since he had been in Southfleet had Mr. Slade received such a thing as a letter. This was a prodigious occasion. It rather scared him.

"Bring it in, my dear."

"It came by hand, Dad; from Mr. Grigson."

"Mr. Grigson?"

"Yes."

"What can he want with me?"

Bertha left Mr. Slade with his letter. He slit the envelope with the handle of a spoon, drew out the sheet of notepaper, unfolded it and read.

Dear Mr. Slade,

I shall be glad if you will call on me at my office at the earliest opportunity. I have a certain matter to communicate to you.

Yours truly,

Richard Grigson.

Mr. Slade read the letter twice. He was frightened. Had his secret been discovered, and was Mr. Grigson concerned in giving him advice? Mr. Slade got up and took off his apron. Well, if some misfortune threatened him he might as well know the worst and get it over. It seemed to him that his Sabbath clothes were indicated. He dressed himself in them, complete with black tie, brushed his hair, gave his best boots a rub, and went out by way of the area steps to confront a possible crisis.

Mr. Grigson's office had been established for thirty-five years on the ground floor of a tall old Regency House in the High Street. It had two bow windows, originals, and a white pillared porch. The Radicals of Southfleet might ask why Mr. Grigson's pillars should be allowed to possess a part of the pavement, for even a couple of stone pillars are capable of arousing envy, but had Mr. Grigson been posed with the equalitarian problem of a new world he might have said: "Oh, quite so, let us all sit on the same chair, but fools will always be fools, and politicians—politicians." He retained in his attitude towards humanity a dry and benign watchfulness. Mr. Grigson's white front door with its polished, lion-headed knocker stood open to Mr. Slade, and Mr. Slade, having rung the bell, waited innocently on the doormat.

The office-boy answered the bell.

"Mr. Grigson has asked me to call."

The office-boy told Mr. Slade to seat himself on the oak chair in the hall, and Mr. Slade did so, nursing his hat on his knees. His soul was still the soul of a suppliant. The office-boy disappeared. Half a minute passed before a clerk came out of the office to deal with Mr. Slade. He was more polite than the office-boy.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Slade. Please come this way. Mr. Grigson will be free in five minutes."

Mr. Slade was conducted into a little waiting-room. Its walls were stacked with law journals and legal text-books, a

most impressive ante-room to the holy of holies. Mr. Slade sat down on a hard chair and, still nursing his hat, felt the solemnity of all this legal literature pressing upon his soul.

Yes, there were familiar friends upon these shelves, and though the atmosphere should have reminded Mr. Slade of the distant past, he sat absorbing it like a small boy who was waiting to be interviewed by the "Head".

Mr. Grigson himself came into the waiting-room, and held out a hand to Mr. Slade.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Slade. Good of you to call so promptly. Come into my private room."

Mr. Slade put his hand in Mr. Grigson's, and the grip was friendly; nor did Mr. Grigson's dry smile suggest that he had unpleasant news to communicate. Mr. Grigson opened the door of his room, and taking Mr. Slade by the arm, walked him in. Mr. Slade saw the formal desk and the formal chair, a big green safe on a wooden stand, rows and rows of black deed-boxes with the names of important clients lettered in white, more legal literature, the portrait in oils of some English worthy, an old map framed in light oak. Mr. Grigson pointed Mr. Slade to the clients' chair and, sitting down in his own chair, looked almost quizzically across his desk at James Slade.

"Have you an idea, Mr. Slade, of why I have sent for you?"

Mr. Slade was still nursing his hat.

"None at all, sir."

Mr. Grigson put his fingers together, and gazed at some document on his desk.

"Perhaps I should have told you before, but I postponed the matter until I had settled certain—details. The point is—you are a beneficiary under Mr. Truslove's will."

"I, sir?"

"Well, yes. And I think very rightly so."

"I never expected anything of the sort, sir."

"I believe you."

Mr. Slade's fingers were caressing the crown of his hat.

"Mr. Truslove was a good friend to me, sir."

"And I think, Mr. Slade, that you were so to him. I happen to know that he had a great respect for you. Now, to come to the point, Mr. Truslove left you a legacy of two thousand pounds, free of duty."

Mr. Slade just sat and stared.

"Two thousand pounds, sir?"

"Yes, two thousand pounds."

Then, Mr. Slade did a most ridiculous thing. He burst into tears.

Mr. Grigson's eyebrows went up in momentary surprise. He picked up a pen, played with it, put it down again, pushed his chair back, crossed his long legs, examined his finger-nails. Mr. Slade had found a handkerchief, and was drying his eyes.

"I must apologize for being such a——"

"No need for an apology. It is, I should say, the sincerest tribute——"

"I never expected anything of the kind, sir."

"I am sure you did not."

"But this—too generous gift. I'm afraid it has rather overwhelmed me. I—— Well, it does mean a new—world to me."

"I am very glad to hear it."

"I'm afraid you will think me a peculiar fellow, Mr. Grigson. I've had an ambition—but I never thought that it could become—possible."

"May I know, Mr. Slade?"

"I'm afraid you will laugh at me. My dream has been to open a toy-shop in Southfleet."

Again Mr. Grigson's eyebrows went up, but he did not laugh. His face seemed to grow more lean and austere. He was thinking of a son who was dead, and whose toys were still stored in a nursery cupboard.

"I see nothing to laugh at, Mr. Slade. I think it is an admirable idea."

Mr. Slade put his handkerchief away.

"I suppose it will be some time—before——"

He was hesitant, apologetic.

"Do you need ready money, Mr. Slade?"

"Well, you see, there happens to be the very place I coveted—about to be left. If I could——"

"I dare say we can arrange something. Where, exactly, is the shop?"

"Babcock's, sir. He is retiring."

"But surely he will dispose of the business as a going concern?"

"Perhaps not, Mr. Grigson. Mr. Babcock has ideas of his own."

"Well, I should go and see him at once. Let me see, I expect Woosnam and Wilkins have the letting. You might buy, but the value of real estate in the High Street is very much on the increase. Better to conserve your capital for the new business."

"I think so, sir."

"Well, go and see Mr. Babcock. If Woosnam's have the letting I could give you a letter to them. No, you can refer them to me—if necessary."

Mr. Slade, having thanked Mr. Grigson, went forth upon the adventure. He found Mr. Babcock shampooing the head of Mr. Berry the butcher. Mr. Slade was shy and anxious.

"Could I have a word with you presently?"

"In ten minutes," said the barber, towelling Mr. Berry's head.

Fortune was in Mr. Slade's favour. His brief interview with Mr. Babcock was uninterrupted, and Mr. Babcock's attitude was whole-heartedly helpful. No, he was not bothering about the business. When he finished he finished. There were three more years of the lease to run, and Messrs. Woosnam and Wilkins were to dispose of it and find a new tenant.

"I've cut your hair, Mr. Slade, for a good many years. I

wish you luck. Toys for the kids. Well, that's not a bad idea. I've often thought I should like to keep a toy-shop."

Mr. Slade, growing more and more heated in the chase, toddled down the High Street to the offices of Messrs. Woosnam and Wilkins. After twenty minutes' delay he was seen by Mr. Wilkins. Mr. Wilkins was sandy and bald and cautious, but when Mr. Slade had given Mr. Grigson as his reference, Mr. Wilkins saw no reason why Mr. Slade should not take over the unexpired moiety of the lease. He would, of course, have to refer the matter to his client, but since Mr. Slade was to be a man of some substance, he did not think the lessor would raise any objections. The rent was fifty-five pounds a year. The landlord was responsible for external repairs, the tenant—for the interior.

Mr. Slade put on his hat, and was unable to resist the impulse which carried him back up the High Street for a loving look at the shop and house which might be his. He knew that Mr. Babcock had a pleasant little garden behind the house, and that beyond it lay Mr. Lovell's nursery. Mr. Slade coveted a garden, a garden of his very own. He would have Mr. Lovell's fruit trees and glass-house on one side, the cedars and elms of the old white house on the other. Mr. Slade was a shiver with excitement. What a wonderful day, what amazing surprises! And then he remembered Mrs. Pomeroy and the hotel. He pulled out his watch. Good heavens, it was twenty minutes past five! He had been absent from duty for more than two hours.

Mr. Slade hurried back, but his haste was without trepidation. He had his freedom in his pocket, his dream buzzing like a swarm of bees in his head. He descended the area steps, and was met by Bertha in the passage.

"Oh, there you are, Dad. She—wants you."

"Upstairs?"

"Yes. She's in one of her tantrums."

"Dear, dear," said Mr. Slade. "I'm afraid I'm in for a scolding."

XVI

I

HE was.

Mrs. Pomeroy was writing out the weekly bills, and though this was an occupation that gave her pleasure, there were other activities which pleased her more. She liked scolding people; she enjoyed crude sarcasm. Scenes which most sensitive people would shrink from and avoid were to her a stimulating wind. Like Britannia, she thrived on storms and tempests.

"Yes, madam."

She turned in her chair so that Mr. Slade saw her in profile, her blonde hair like some portentous head-dress, her nose elevated, her chin, jutting out below compressed lips. A formidable figure! And yet, for the first time since his coming to Southfleet Mr. Slade found himself regarding her dispassionately and without fear. He had something up his sleeve for Clara, and he was feeling naughty about it.

"What does this mean, Slade?"

"What, madam?"

"What, indeed! You have been absent from duty for three hours."

Mr. Slade glanced at his watch.

"To be correct, Clara, about two hours and a half."

This impudence brought her full front and to her feet.

"How dare you address me with such familiarity? Where have you been?"

"To Mr. Grigson's."

"Mr. Grigson? What for?"

"Private business of my own, madam."

"Private business!"

"Yes, Mr. Grigson sent for me. I have had a great surprise. Mr. Truslove remembered me in his will."

"A small legacy, I suppose."

"Two thousand pounds, madam."

The surprise was Mrs. Pomeroy's. Her contempt for this quiet little man had become so much a habit with her that she was capable of being shocked and astonished when some other person contradicted her contempt by selecting him for so extraordinary a favour. It was a gross offence to her. She was no fool, if her intelligence was rather like a sharp knife cutting into cheese. Mr. Slade had provided her with a life's grievance. He had disappointed her from the very inception of the married state, and even his timid and rather ineffectual attempts at intimacy had been those of a fumbler. She was a bitter woman, implacably so, a creature in whom the divine afflatus blew always from the north-east. She had enjoyed this vindictiveness, and the power she possessed in imposing a penance upon the man who had failed her. And now that meddlesome old fool of a Truslove had left him two thousand pounds!

"So, Slade, your servility—did not go unrewarded."

Mr. Slade smiled. Her face of thunder was no longer that of a female Jove.

"Probably, Clara, you will not believe me when I say that I did not dream of any such thing happening."

"You need not lie to me, Slade."

"Then it is as I suggested."

"Poof!" said she. "You don't humbug me."

"God forbid that I should attempt such sacrilege!"

Irony, indeed! Irony from this futile old fool who yet had managed to fool an older fool! Her thin lips curled back from her prominent teeth.

"Naturally, Mr. Truslove did not know—your past."

"On the contrary, Clara, he did."

She drew a deep breath. Her hands clenched themselves like a man's.

"You told him?"

Mr. Slade nodded.

"And broke your promise to me! Disgraceful! I take you in

and give you a home, and you repay me with treachery. You always were a rogue, Slade, and a coward."

"All that I did was to trust my secret to a friend."

"An old chatterbox. Of course he passed it on."

"He did not."

"Nonsense. I suppose Mr. Grigson knows."

"No, Clara, he does not."

"Do you think I believe you?"

"It does not matter."

"And what are you going to do with this precious money?"

"Open a toy-shop, Clara, in the High Street."

This indeed was the final indignity. A toy-shop! And supposing the truth leaked out? Mrs. Pomeroy's face went flaccid. She sat down suddenly in a chair. Maybe, she had begun to realize that the scourge had changed hands.

"Becoming a—tradesman!"

"Why not, Clara?"

"It's—it's nothing but—blackmail."

"Blackmail! Why blackmail?"

"I suppose you never think of your child?"

"I think of her constantly, Clara."

"And yet you can do a thing like this, perhaps ruin her prospects. It's cruel and wicked."

James Slade stood quite still, regarding her steadfastly. How high-minded Clara became when she thought her own selfish interests were threatened.

"My dear Clara, there is no such danger. She will never know."

"How can you be—sure?"

"Well, I have been here a number of years and she does not know."

"You're a fool, Slade."

"My dear Clara, doesn't it occur to you that my becoming a shop-keeper means—that I shall keep my secret? I happen to love my daughter. If you were less selfish you would understand."

Mrs. Pomeroy stared at him.

"I—selfish, when I have spent my life—for Rose's future!"

"Oh, no, Clara. Try to be honest. Rose has been a kind of doll—your doll. You don't love Rose—as Rose. You love her—as a piece of property."

Mrs. Pomeroy drew a deep breath, held it and then started to her feet.

"How dare you say such a thing! Get out of my house, get out at once. Go and lose your silly money, you fool. Never again will I try to help you."

"Thank you, Clara. I will go and pack my bag."

2

Mr. Slade's exodus was so strangely sudden that the "Kitchen" could do no more than sit back and gape, and then break into indignation. Mr. Slade just walked into the kitchen dressed in his Sunday best, and smiling, said, "I have come to say good-bye to you all. I have been discharged." Tea was still on the table and Mr. Slade's place waiting for him, and Eliza had put the teapot on the kitchen grate to keep it warm.

"What! You don't mean to say——?"

"She's sacked you, after all these years?"

"That is the situation," said Mr. Slade, still smiling. "I am going at once, but not before I have said good-bye to my friends. You have all been very kind to me."

But Mrs. Eliza would have none of this.

"You sit down, Mr. Slade, and have your tea. You're not going without it."

"I don't think I ought to——"

"You sit down, Dad."

In brief, May and Bertha took Mr. Slade by the arms and sat him down in his chair.

"Coo, I knew she was in one of her tempers. I feel like walkin' out myself"

"Disgraceful I call it."

They gathered round Mr. Slade like affectionate daughters. May put a great dollop of butter on his plate, Bertha two large spoonfuls of jam. He had three lumps of sugar in his tea. Eliza asked him if he would like an egg.

"No, no, I'm quite happy," said Mr. Slade, and he looked it.

Eliza, the high priestess, sat considering the catastrophe.

"But where are you going, Dad?"

Mr. Slade looked coy.

"Well, as a matter of fact, to the Regency Hotel for a night or two, if they will take me."

The kitchen goggled its eyes at this. The Regency Hotel!

"Well I never! But that's the spirit, Dad."

Mr. Slade stirred his tea.

"As a matter of fact, my dears, I don't know why I shouldn't tell you. I have had a legacy. Mr. Truslove left me——"

"Good old Trussy!"

"Two thousand pounds."

"Coo, I say, Dad!"

"I always knew Mr. Truslove was a real old sport."

Mr. Slade had packed his belongings. The whole staff accompanied him up the area steps and, standing in a group, waved him good-bye. "Come and see us, Dad." Mr. Slade raised his hat. "I think you had better come and see me." Mr. Sawkins, picking his teeth and surveying the world from Mr. Truslove's balcony, saw Mr. Slade and his bag, and remembered that he had a grievance against Mr. Slade.

"Slade."

Mr. Slade looked up.

"Yes."

Mr. Sawkins missed the "Sir". He expected to be addressed as "Esquire" on his letters.

"You forgot my boots this morning."

Mr. Slade smiled up at Mr. Sawkins. He was feeling cheeky.

"Did I? Well, you see, I am no longer responsible for your boots, Mr. Sawkins."

The Staff giggled, and Mr. Saykins glared at them. What were the lower orders coming to? The girls followed Eliza down the area steps.

"Coo, I'm not going to clean his smelly old boots. Didn't Dad give 'im one!"

Mrs. Eliza reproved them. "Not so much chatter, young women."

Mrs. Eliza was feeling both sad and sentimental. She re-entered her kitchen, and while nobody was looking she collected Mr. Slade's cup, and smuggled it under her apron. The cup was transferred to the top, left-hand drawer of Eliza's chest of drawers, and concealed under a clean cap. Eliza had nourished a tenderness for Mr. Slade, but the golden wings of Mr. Truslove's legacy appeared to be floating him away from and above the caresses of the kitchen.

Mr. Slade did not stay at the Regency Hotel. He walked into it, took one look at the two somewhat supercilious ladies in the office, raised his hat to them and walked out again. He passed down Pier Hill into the old town, and turning into that more human tavern, The Ship, asked to be supplied with a bedroom. Yes, bed and board. The Ship accepted him. He was given a room with a window overlooking The Ship's tea-garden and stables.

When Mr. Slade had unpacked his things he sat down on the bed to marvel at this amazing day. At three o'clock he had been cleaning the silver, and now at half-past seven or so he was for the moment a man of leisure, the master of two thousand pounds, free to come and go as he pleased. A most strange feeling came over him. Something in him seemed to be waiting for a bell to ring, a bell that would set him in motion like a mechanical toy. But there was no bell. There would be no more bell, no more boots, no more scuttles of coal, no luggage to carry upstairs, no more scoldings. Amazing! He was free. He was a guest of The Ship, and other people would fetch and carry for him.

Tears came into Mr. Slade's eyes, and his throat went thick. How good and kind most people were! In his simplicity he did not suspect that a great part of the world was good and kind to him because he was what he was. Sour souls stew in their own bitter juices. But Mr. Slade knelt down beside his bed, and gave thanks to God and to Mr. Truslove—that sardonic and silent friend who, in his humanity, had worked this miracle.

James Slade rose from his knees and went to the window. The tea-gardens of The Ship were alive with London folk, men, women and children. They sat at the round tables covered with white American cloth and ate largely and with much conversation.

"Tea with shrimps," said Mr. Slade to himself. "Good business. Blessed be every little tummy, and may there be no after-pangs."

He put on his hat and went out. He strolled, he loitered, savouring the human scene and loving it. Boats were still busy, the sea a'glitter. A barrel organ played, and young men and women danced in the roadway. Mr. Slade leaned upon the parade railings and smiled upon them, and was ready to dance with them, for the feet of his spirit were moving to new music. He was free.

Mr. Slade passed back up Pier Hill, happily harnessed to a double purpose. A new fruit and flower shop had been opened in the High Street by a gentleman of Hebrew persuasion, Mr. Isaacs, and Mr. Isaacs, like the majority of his race, was a hard worker and efficient. He believed in exploiting those extra hours which the more indolent English eschewed, and Mr. Slade found the shop open. Mr. Isaacs was very much there in person, fat and swarthy and vital, coat off, hat on the back of his head and ridding himself of surplus cherries and strawberries to the London folk trailing back to the railway station. Mr. Isaacs had large and hairy hands, but they were dexterous. He blew into paper bags, tumbled fruit into them, clapped them on the scales, and twirled the bags between his two hands with a speed that was

astonishing. Mr. Slade was in search of flowers, not of fruit. Had Mr. Isaacs any roses left? He had.

"Er, mister. In the shop, pleathe."

Miss Isaacs was in charge within, swarthy like her father, but jocund and comely.

"I want some roses. Yes, those red ones. Can I have a dozen?"

Of course he could. Miss Isaacs selected them for him, wrapped the stalks in paper, and smiled upon him with brown-eyed beneficence. Mr. Slade paid her and went off with his flowers.

His objective was the churchyard of St. John's. In the north-east corner and sunning itself under a brick wall, Mr. Truslove's grave wore its faded wreaths. Mr. Slade removed his hat and, bending down, placed his roses on the mound of soil. Then, standing bare-headed, he prayed for his dead friend.

"Thank you, John, and may God be with you. Shall I forget? Never."

Mr. Slade was smiling. He was reflecting that he would be here in Southfleet to care for the grave of the man who had given him freedom. He would have a cross set up, and a simple marble kerb placed about a mat of green turf where flowers could lie. John should have his flowers, and at Christmas a wreath of holly. Mr. Slade's simple soul found happiness in thinking of such things.

Then, he put on his hat and joined the London crowd in the High Street. He idled with it to the green gate of "The Cedars", and standing there contemplated the little red house and shop across the way. He had more than a feeling that it was to be his. The holiday crowd flowed past him, and yet another inspiration was revealed to James Slade. These Londoners brought their children with them, and though many of them now were tired children, they would be fresh and eager in the pride of the morning.

"Why, of course," said James Slade to himself. "Buckets and spades—buckets and spades for the sands. And boats.

Why, of course. Custom passing my very door. In summer I could have a sort of hat-stand outside hung all over with buckets and spades."

XVII

I

MR. BABCOCK moved out, and Mr. Slade moved in, but this interchange was something of an improvisation, for Mr. Slade, in his innocence, forgot half the necessities that his new domestic adventure demanded, and his first night in No. 17, The High Street found him attempting to sleep on a bed that had a mattress but no pillows. Well, really! Was it economy or a precious simplicity that had persuaded him to buy a teapot but no kettle, and to forget such articles as dish-cloths and soap, and to discover that his toilet-set lacked one vulgar but very necessary receptacle? Mr. Slade scratched his head over the shopping list he had drawn up, and was persuaded that it would be better for him to consult authority.

Meanwhile, Messrs. Pawley and Beckwith, painters, decorators and joiners, were very busy in the front of the building, adapting it to its new duties. Messrs. Pawley and Beckwith were working craftsmen, and typical of that more serene and capable craftsmanship which was honest and contented and thorough. Both were men of fresh colour and blue of eye; Mr. Pawley was fair, with a little beard, Mr. Beckwith brown, with a massive moustache. They had been friends from boyhood, and they were friends in craftsmanship. Mr. Pawley had a merry tongue, Mr. Beckwith was of a more silent gravity. On Sundays he took the senior bible-class for boys in the vestry of St. John's Church. He knew his bible from Genesis to Revelations, and as a man he was a working bible, wise and of a shrewd integrity.

Mr. Slade had put his case to those two partners. He had

said that economy was necessary, and that if Messrs. Pawley and Beckwith could combine sound work with economy, it would be very helpful.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Slade. You leave it to us."

Mr. Slade left it to them and was satisfied. Messrs. Pawley and Beckwith were never round the corner. They did not gossip with all and sundry. They did not monkey with the paint-pot, or use wood that would crack and warp. Mr. Slade, observing the work in process, was like a delighted child watching the growth of the nursery of his dreams.

"I'd suggest a nice green paint for the counter, Mr. Slade."

"Yes, green."

"Won't soil so quickly as white. And the shelves——"

"Could we have the shelves white?"

"White it shall be, Mr. Slade."

James was camping in the kitchen and one bedroom. The rest of the house could be furnished later. Meanwhile there were the lapses in that inventory to be amended. Mr. Slade needed advice, and Mr. Slade thought of Eliza. There were times when it was not good policy to approach the autocrat of the kitchen, and James Slade chose both the time and the occasion, adventuring down the area steps at the hour when the staff would be consuming a cocoa and bread-and-cheese supper.

It was Jane who answered the area bell, and Jane who had hopes of finding a particular young man there, but instead she found Mr. Slade. Disappointed she may have been, yet glad in other ways.

"Why, Dad!—I beg your pardon, Mr. Slade."

"Dad it is, my dear. May I come in?"

"We'll be glad."

"Thank you, my dear."

Actually, the staff of the Caroline Hotel had waited and wondered upon some such occasion. Mr. Slade was no longer just Slade, but a gentleman of property, a householder and a

rate-payer. It might be beneath him to descend the area steps, but when he did descend them his welcome was immediate.

"Why, Dad, it's you!"

"Have a cup of cocoa."

Mr. Slade went to shake hands solemnly with Mrs. Eliza.

"I don't mind if I do. Glad to be with you all again. You see, I've been so busy."

"I bet you have."

Mr. Slade sat down beside the cook.

"As a matter of fact, my dears, I seem to have got into rather a muddle. Forgetting things I ought to remember. I thought Mrs. Eliza might advise me."

Feeling in his pocket he brought out his inventory, and laid it on the table beside Mrs. Eliza's plate.

"I wonder if you would look through it and tell me what I have forgotten."

The kitchen was ready to go into committee upon the subject of Mr. Slade's domestic inventory, but Mrs. Eliza assumed the prerogative to be hers, and tucked the paper away under her plate. She said that she would look through the list, and since to-morrow was her afternoon off she would call on Mr. Slade, advise him, and if necessary do his shopping for him. A man could not be expected to know all that was to be known about the anatomy of a house.

Mr. Slade, sipping his cocoa, thanked Mrs. Eliza. To him she was no figure of romance, but a solid and kindly creature with more sense than sentiment.

"It's very good of you, Eliza."

"And who's going to do for you, Dad?"

"Do for me?"

"Yes, look after you?"

"Well, just at present I'm looking after myself."

Then, one of the bells rang in the passage, and Mr. Slade stiffened in his chair. Almost, the familiar summons stimulated him into action.

"That's old Sawkins wanting hot water for his whisky."

Bertha rose and went to identify the bell. It was not Mr. Sawkins's bell. The summons came from Mrs. Pomeroy.

"Coo, it's—her bell!"

Mr. Slade rose.

"I think I had better be going."

"Sit down, Dad."

"Well, I shouldn't be here, you know."

"I bet she heard someone come down the area steps."

Again the bell pealed, and with more insistence. Bertha made a face, and went up to answer it.

"When I ring a bell," said the lady, "I expect it to be answered at once. Who is in the kitchen?"

Bertha was in a pert mood.

"Mr. Slade, ma'am."

"Slade! Impudence! Tell him to leave my house at once."

"Very good, ma'am."

Mrs. Pomeroy stepped out on to her balcony to listen. She heard the area door open and shut, and Mr. Slade's footsteps ascending. She addressed him.

"Slade."

"Yes, madam?"

"I am surprised at your impertinence. In future—you will not visit—my maids. You understand me?"

"Perfectly, madam. I am sorry that my visit should have distressed you!"

2

Mr. Slade said to Mr. Pawley, "I want it gay, you know, I want it to be gay," and Mr. Pawley twinkled at him, and winked at Mr. Beckwith.

"God said 'Let it be gay', and it was gay."

Mr. Pawley, who was a patriot, would have painted the shop-front red, white and blue, but Mr. Slade's fancy was more subtle. He had christened his shop "The Toy Mart", and at

either end of the fascia-board a fairy was to float, waving a wand. Now fairies always wear white filmy frocks and rose-coloured sashes, so Mr. Slade's colour scheme became rose and white. Mr. Pawley boggled rather over the fairies; fairies were not in his line, but he had a brother who was a bit of an artist, and Mr. Pawley Junior mounted a ladder and contrived to place the fairies where they should be. Then, Mr. Slade had another idea, a hanging sign-board in the old-fashioned style, with Father Christmas on it, so Mr. Beckwith made the hanging board, and Mr. Pawley Junior painted two Father Christmases on it, one with an empty sack, the other with a sack that was full, a nice flight of fancy.

Mr. Beckwith, being a very conscientious craftsman, felt it his duty to point out to Mr. Slade that those light colours would not stand the weather like a good shade of brown.

"Oh, bother the brown," said Mr. Slade. "I want it gay. It can always be re-painted, can't it?"

"But it will cost you more."

"I don't mind. You've a good brown conscience, Mr. Beckwith."

Mr. Pawley saw the joke, and chuckled.

"Bob will have a brown halo some day, sir."

"Oh no, Mr. Pawley, I think it will be good gold."

There was no doubt about the gaiety of "The Toy Mart", even before its windows became alive with colour. Children stopped to stare. "Oo-er, look at Father Christmas!" Even the elders of Southfleet paused to take notice, for "The Toy Mart" was not veritable Southfleet. There was an almost goblin gaiety about it, and some of the graver disciplinarians did not approve, those who believed in the old dictum that children should be seen and not heard. And what, after all, were toys? Too many toys spoiled a child. Satan might lurk in a sweet-stuff shop, but Mr. Slade was blind to such strict morality.

Maybe he was learning what every man who dares some adventure, however obscure, or follows some creative urge, learns;

that the people who blame and those who spend their lives in minding other people's businesses for them are second-raters. No first-rater could be content with passing his life in poking his administrative fingers into the affairs of those who do. Mr. Slade, having suffered some years of social discipline in its most unenlightened form, wanted to escape from school like a child, and be with children. He was a blessed rebel against the eternal "Don't". Come on, lads and lasses, let's play Hunt The Slipper. Yes, let's— Mischief, my dears, a little happy mischief. Then, the Second-Raters would arrive with solemn, frowning foreheads, and note-books and pencils. "Hum, 'Hunt The Slipper'! Was it quite—moral? No, certainly not, when indulged in—beyond a certain age." Out would come the nice, official forms. "State your name, in block capitals. Age, profession. State why you wish to play the game, where and when." Then, having duly conferred together the official "Don'ts" would decide that the game was unsuitable for adults, and that no child above the age of fourteen should be permitted to play it.

Mr. Slade might learn to laugh at such people, and plain men would have understood him. Mr. Pawley would have understood him perfectly, Mr. Beckwith a little less so. Were there any children in Somerset House? God forbid! Why ask so irrelevant a question? But the trouble is that your Second-Raters can be so stupidly and solemnly persistent, bearing upon their banners that most characteristic device—"Commit No Nuisance."

3

There was one person in Southfleet who was stimulated into further activity by this display of playfulness on the part of Mr. Slade. Mrs. Pomeroy, having business with her bankers, and passing Mr. Slade's new shop, paused to consider it.

"The Toy Mart."

She saw the name upon the fascia board, "James Slade," and

the stark evidence of the wretched man's lapse into trade moved her to anger. What if the secret should emerge? Yes, she had been a fool to allow her vindictive charity to exercise itself on James Slade's behalf. Had she been wiser she would have pensioned him off in some London suburb, but in that case she would not have been able to enjoy a righteous revenge. Revenge is not always sweet. It may turn sour on you, and Mrs. Pomeroy was moved to hurry the fruition of her social scheming. With such a skeleton in her cupboard it behoved her to capture and consolidate the position she coveted before any mischance, wilful or otherwise, might drag the bag of bones into the light of day.

Mrs. Pomeroy, having concluded her business at the bank, took a walk westwards along the cliff. A furlong or so beyond Southfleet's latest villas stood that enviable house "Highfield", cloistered among its trees, and with its garden sheltered by a high oak fence. It was built of warm red brick, and rather in the French style, with two little tourelles pricking their sharp, slate-covered ears above the trees. There were many windows in "Highfield", and Mrs. Pomeroy preferred a house with many windows, for they were like strings of pearls upon an imposing bosom. She paused at the iron gates, and was able to see the sweep of the gravel drive, two brilliant beds of pelargonium and lobelia, a strip of lawn, a black cat asleep upon a window-sill. "Highfield" possessed a flagstaff, and from its throat floated a Union Jack, for a certain Admiral Horatio Adams lived here, a stately and hot-tempered old gentleman with ice-blue eyes and little white whiskers. Admiral Adams was very old and a widower, and Mrs. Pomeroy knew him to be a sick man, but the flag was still flying and the blinds were up.

Mrs. Pomeroy walked on. A dog-cart came bowling behind her along the cliff road, but she did not hear it, for she was absorbed in contemplating her precious plans. That was the predestined house. She would move hell and heaven to possess it, and when it was hers she would rename it "The Admiral's

House". Yes, that would sound so distinguished, and taste of so Georgian a flavour. All that remained was for the old man to die, and in secret Mrs. Pomeroy did hope that he would not procrastinate. She had passed beyond the trees and down the hill towards the sea, and behind her Dr. Richmond's dog-cart had pulled up outside the iron gates.

As a dreamer of day-dreams Mrs. Pomeroy was not a woman who would sit down on some grassy bank and look at the sea. She had no feeling for Nature, and a tree was just a tree, unless it was part of some social decoration. She passed under the great elms which shaded the hollow of the hill road, and was not moved to contemplate them, though what the great trees thought of Mrs. Pomeroy might be matter for a mystic. She just walked and spun patterns in her head, patterns that were festooned with swags of £ s. d. Maybe her meditative strolling swallowed up an hour, and returning by the same road she looked again upon the Highfield trees. Something had happened—something was lacking. Dr. Richmond's dog-cart had gone; but half an hour ago the doctor had come out of the house, glanced at the flag, and walking across the grass had unfastened the halyards and let the flag fall until it was half-way down the staff.

Mrs. Pomeroy quickened her steps. She came to the iron gates, saw the flag hanging half-mast high, and was thrilled. She glanced at the windows of "Highfield". The blinds were down. Mrs. Pomeroy drew a deep breath. Half an hour later she was seated in Mr. Woosnam's private room, issuing her instructions across his desk.

"I want that house."

So, the Admiral was dead! But Mr. Woosnam had certain notions of niceness even in the conduct of so material a business as that of the buying and selling of houses. Too sudden and tumultuous an approach might appear unseemly. He suggested a little apologetically to the lady that it would be better to employ a modicum of polite patience.

"I would suggest putting out tactful feelers——"

"But I don't want to lose that house."

"Quite so, madam. But, as yet, we don't quite know how matters lie. I expect that Mr. Grigson will be acting. I could interview him and ask him in confidence whether 'Highfield' is likely to be on the market."

"Well, see him at once. I know what lawyers are."

Mrs. Pomeroy might be a valued client, but old Woosnam disliked being lectured.

"May I suggest, madam, that I have had some experience in these matters. If you will allow me to conduct my business in my own way."

Mrs. Pomeroy shrugged.

"I mean to have that house. Your business is to get it for me. Now, that other matter. What was Golightly's latest offer for half the timber-yard?"

"Five thousand pounds."

"Ask him six. And Scarron's for the other half?"

"Three."

"Preposterous. I want twelve thousand for the land. Not a penny less. They know as well as I know that it is the most valuable new frontage in Southfleet."

Mr. Woosnam's smile was a kind of inward, sardonic twinkle. Frontage! Did not that word apply to the lady? She possessed a most formidable frontage!

XVIII

I

MR. SLADE, sitting in his back garden on an August evening and hearing the muffled murmur of the High Street as it flowed stationwards, was not disturbed by that human hum. Rather, it pleased him. It was good to be a little apart from the crowd, but it was good to know that the crowd was near,

and that one's earth was not the icy desolation of some lonely planet. Moreover, Mr. Slade was engaged upon a very delightful and enthralling task. He had drawn out a list of the merchandise that would be displayed in "The Toy Mart", and he was checking and adding to it.

Mr. Slade's pencil travelled down the page.

Lead Soldiers—Dolls—Dolls' Houses—Buckets—Spades—Toy Guns—Noah's Arks—Dolls' Tea-sets—Dolls' Cradles—Hoops and Hoopsticks—Balls—Skipping-ropes—Cricket Bats—Toy Animals—Toy Engines, etc.—Skittles—Tops—Babies' Rattles—Magic Lanterns—Story Books—Battledores and Shuttlecocks—Trap, Bat and Ball—Toy Yachts and Boats—Whistles—Toy Trumpets—Drums—Games:—Race-Game—Spillikins—Ludo, Etc.—Christmas Crackers—Christmas Candles—Christmas Stockings—Chinese Lanterns.

Mr. Slade's pencil paused. He sucked the end of it, and considered the next item.

Fireworks for Guy Fawkes' day and Masks.

Well, why not? Would Southfleet regard him as an old nuisance for providing the young with squibs and crackers?—Moreover, would not some immense squib be good for the solemn smugness of a portion of the population? There were certain ladies who might benefit by having a Chinese cracker popping about under their petticoats.

Masks? Most certainly.

Sweets? Yes, a few bottles of sweets should be included. Particular pets might be allowed to dip into them without payment.

Mr. Slade lay back in his chair, and allowed himself to picture his toy-shop as it would be, a miniature Lowther Arcade, a riot of colour, a fascination to the young. And he would be King of the Castle, the Pied Piper, Father Christmas, the Goblin Godfather all in one. Why—at Christmas—should he not dress himself for the part, and serve in scarlet and white cotton wool?

It was an idea—yes, very much an idea. With eyes half closed and the inventory reposing on his tummy, he contemplated the future with utter satisfaction, and with no attention to the problem of profit and loss. Then, a sudden trembling of the branches of one of Mr. Lovell's summerling apples beyond the garden wall, moved Mr. Slade to sit up and take notice. The tree was set with red-cheeked apples, and the figure of a small boy became visible, scrambling and writhing towards the forbidden fruit. Who was the thief? And did his duty as a citizen exhort him to interfere? Mr. Slade saw a hand pluck an apple.

"Cissie."

"Yes."

"I'll drop them. Hold out your pinny."

Mr. Slade rose, and walking to the wall, tiptoed so that he could see over it. A small girl in pink was standing with her back to him, spreading her pinafore to catch the plunder. The boy's face showed among the leaves. It was the face of Mr. Lovell's younger son.

The boy's eyes met Mr. Slade's. There was alarm in them that tried to conceal itself behind a mischievous grin.

"Hallo, Mr. Slade."

"Hallo, my son."

"Cissy wanted an apple."

"Oh, Adam, Adam! The woman tempted me! Does your father know, Georgie?"

"No, he doesn't."

"Dear, dear! Well, I don't think I'll tell him—if you're not too greedy."

The boy's freckled face smiled upon Mr. Slade. He pulled an apple and prepared for the toss.

"Catch, Mr. Slade."

Mr. Slade caught the apple, looked at it, and shook his head.

"That's compounding a felony, George. I think Cissie ought to have it."

"No, you keep it, Mr. Slade. I'll just pick three more."

"Just three more."

"Honour bright."

The boy picked his three apples, and then slid swiftly down the tree.

Mr. Slade stood holding the stolen fruit in his hand and regarding it with whimsical embarrassment. Should he partake of it, and become one with Cissie, or salve his conscience by passing it on to some other child? Oh, man, man, relieving himself of the problem by presenting it to Eve! No, dash it, he would eat the apple now and immediately, and hide the plunder inside him. Most certainly he could not return it to Mr. Lovell. He would have to make it up to Mr. Lovell in some other way. Mr. Slade passed in by the back door, reflecting that a sporting God might have had more respect for Adam had that cowardly fellow been bolder and more honest. "The woman has a way with her, you know, and I—fell. After all, sir, you made us that way, and we are not gods like you." Mr. Slade bit into the apple, and it was sweet. So could be that thing called sin, sweet in the mouth, but sometimes turning sour in the belly. Good old English—that. Mr. Slade passed through into the shop, and once again allowed himself to gloat over its gaiety and the gaiety that was to be. Munching his apple he approached one of the windows to watch the holiday crowd sweating stationwards to the music of concertinas.

"Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do——"

Mr. Slade's face was close to the glass when another and a sudden face came looming up almost within a foot of his. This other face confronted him like that of a visitor to an aquarium, and he was the fish in a glass tank nibbling at ants' eggs or green water-growth. Mr. Slade stopped munching.

Clara!

Most strangely did he feel like a small boy caught in the act of consuming forbidden fruit. Why Clara? Had she come to spy out the land? They stood and stared at each other through

the glass. Perhaps Clara had not expected to be confronted by this other face, and that her surprise and her embarrassment were as acute as his. Embarrassment. Had he ever known Clara to suffer from any such emotion? Then, he became aware of the lips moving in that other face. It was speaking to him. It said, "I have something to discuss with you."

Mr. Slade was not sure of the words, but he did realize that Clara's presence was not fortuitous. She wanted something. What? He had the shop-door key in his pocket, and he extracted it and unlocked the door. His left hand continued to clutch the half-eaten apple.

"Come in, Clara."

She rustled in and he closed the door. The solidity of her massive face and her formidable figure were utterly familiar to him, and yet the staging of the scene was new. They were meeting on other ground, a shop-floor that was his, and with a sudden feeling of puckishness Mr. Slade resumed the munching of his apple. The very act seemed to symbolize his claim to independence.

The shop had acquired its two new cane-bottomed chairs, one by each counter, for Mr. Slade's Toy Mart was to divide its functions into male and female.

"Sit down, Clara."

Mrs. Pomeroy sat down like some large social problem settling itself upon appropriate foundations. Mr. Slade did otherwise. His puckishness mounted the counter. He sat there with his legs dangling, and went on munching his apple.

"What can I do for you, Clara?"

What a challenge was that! She gave him a sudden, upward stare, the full glance of the affronted and accusing mother.

"I wish you to be—serious, not frivolous. You were always—so—frivolous."

"Oh, Clara!"

"Yes, you were. Never grown up."

"And now I'm growing down."

She gave a shrug of impatience and of protest.

"Try to be—serious. It is not for myself that I ask it."

Mr. Slade had finished his apple, and he laid the core down on the counter.

"One should not eat the pips, Clara, should one?"

She did not seem to hear this childish remark; at least, she did not give it her attention. She was drawing off one of her gloves, and there, on a plump finger gleamed that circle of gold, her wedding-ring. She regarded it.

"Do you remember that day, James?"

Mr. Slade sat up with sudden alertness on his counter, like a boy posed with a question by some sly pedagogue in cap and gown. Was Clara becoming sentimental? Ye gods, then it behoved him to be careful.

"Yes, I remember it very well, Clara."

She turned the ring on her finger.

"We all make mistakes. I will allow that. But you did promise me certain things."

"I did."

"To love and cherish."

Mr. Slade's mouth became gently humorous.

"And you, Clara, promised to obey me."

Her large face loomed at him.

"Don't mock, man. This is a very serious moment. I have come here ready to forgive certain wrongs. I am thinking, James, of our daughter."

What condescension! She was permitting him to claim some share in the marital act.

"Well, Clara, proceed."

Once again she glanced at her ring.

"I am growing an old woman. My future is not of such supreme importance——"

"Humbug," thought Mr. Slade.

"Our daughter's future is that which matters. I have plans for Rose."

"Such as marrying her to young Hallard."

"I will marry her to the man she chooses."

"Oh, will you," thought her husband. "And you will take jolly good care to do the choosing."

His heels drummed gently against the counter, and the sound appeared to irritate the lady. She frowned at his feckless feet.

"I want Rose to be happy. I want her future to be—without—er—complications. All that I——"

Mr. Slade's heels went on drumming.

"No rattling of old bones, Clara."

"Do stop fidgeting, and try to realize——"

Mr. Slade sat very still for a moment. Then he got slowly off the counter, and went to look out of the shop window.

"I'm an old ghost, Clara, eh? But I shan't haunt Rose. Do you really think it necessary to come to me and play the fond mother? I shall always remain in the cupboard, unless——"

She turned sharply in her chair, and found him confronting her.

"Unless? What do you mean by that?"

"Just this, Clara. That—if you should try to sell Rose into social slavery, I should feel justified in——"

"How dare you suggest such a thing?"

"I don't suggest anything, Clara; but if I were you I should keep it in mind."

2

To dream of toys, to paint imaginary pictures of still life in toys, and to bring those toys into being were quite other matters. Lawyers might dally, and relations bristle with obstructions, but Mr. Grigson so contrived that Mr. Slade had money lying at the bank. Messrs. Pawley and Beckwith's bill was paid, and all the new white shelves waited to be dressed, but Mr. Slade found his innocence confronted with the commercial problem of stocking his shop.

How did one set about it? Of course he could have gone up to London and purchased toys here, there, and everywhere, but what would become of his profit, and how could he resell to Southfleet goods purchased at retail prices?

Wholesalers! Yes, they were the people, but he knew nothing of the wholesale trade in toys, where to go and how to set about it.

He appealed to Mr. Grigson to advise him, and Mr. Grigson, smiling his dry smile, said, "Why not consult Mr. Golightly?"

Mr. Golightly had the reputation, and rightly so, of being the most enterprising trader in Southfleet. Like Mr. Slade, he attended St. John's Church, and being a successful man and well pleased with life, his attitude to his fellows was, if a little patronizing, sleek and benign. His top hat and frock coat were the glossiest in Southfleet, even more so than Dr. Richmond's, and his morning stride to his establishment cheerful and brisk and debonair.

Mr. Slade laid wait for Mr. Golightly and accosted him as he was passing along Caroline Terrace.

"Good morning, sir. I wonder if you could give me some advice?"

Mr. Golightly had superfine manners. He traded in silk, and his politeness was of the same quality. Moreover, he loved giving advice, and he would display his knowledge like your perfect salesman serving some eminent lady.

"Why, certainly Mr. Slade. What is the problem?"

In a few words Mr. Slade explained his difficulties, adding that it was Mr. Grigson who had suggested that Mr. Golightly might be willing to place his very great experience at Mr. Slade's service. Moreover, Mr. Slade hurried to explain that his little toy-shop would not intrude upon the prerogatives of Mr. Golightly's much more important establishment. Mr. Golightly strode along on his oiled legs with silky smoothness, and Mr. Slade pattered along beside him.

"You have come to the right man, Mr. Slade. No, no, there is no likelihood of our clashing."

"Thank you, sir."

"Wholesale houses. What? Of course. I have had no personal dealings with the firms who import and distribute such products as toys, but I can find out, I can find out."

"Of course you can, sir."

"I will request my own principal firm to give me recommendations. And—an introduction. Yes, yes, I shall be most glad to be of assistance to you, Mr. Slade."

Mr. Golightly's affability was as glossy as his hat. They had turned into the High Street, and Mr. Golightly paused, and pointed with a gloved finger at the timber-yard.

"I, too, am engaged upon a new enterprise. I need more room, sir, more room. My business is so expansive that I am erecting new premises on that site."

He tapped Mr. Slade on the shoulder.

"Just twenty years ago, yes, just twenty years ago. What was I? A young man with a few shillings—and—if I may say so—not without imagination—audacity. Taking risks, Mr. Slade. That is when a man may prove himself a little different—a'hem—from the crowd. I began with one window. Now I have eight. Next year it will be twenty. Windows are—evidence, Mr. Slade."

"I am sure you have deserved your success, sir."

"I hope so, I hope so. Well, call on me in three or four days' time, Mr. Slade, and I am sure that I shall have the necessary information for you," and Mr. Golightly swept on his long, oiled legs into his establishment, beneficent and breezy, and quite sure that God was in Heaven and that all was well with his world.

So, Mr. Slade went to London on a visit to the two Wholesale Houses discovered for him by Mr. Golightly, to find him-

self in the display room of a warehouse which was to him a veritable magic cave. Mr. Golightly's "Open Sesame" had uncovered to Mr. Slade all the treasures of the Purple East, though—actually—most of the products came from Germany. Here were lead soldiers by the million, boxes upon boxes of them, British Grenadiers and Lifeguards, Frenchmen in blue and red, Russians in green, Prussians in dark blue, with spiky helmets, Lancers, Hussars, Artillery, kilted Highlanders, Zulus, even Chinamen. Mr. Slade wallowed in soldiers, and in a complete galaxy of toys. He had his list with him, and he ticked off item by item, though this particular House could not provide him with some of the more vulgar and elementary merchandise.

"I'm afraid we don't stock wooden spades."

Well, no matter. No doubt such products could be obtained elsewhere. Mr. Slade completed his stock list, and was a little flabbergasted when he was told how much the order would cost him. Well, again, no matter. His toy-shop was to be—the toy-shop—in his little world, no shabby show, but a Temple of Delight for countless children. He wrote out a cheque, and walked out and on to visit a second firm who were housed somewhere in The Barbican off Aldergate Street, and who were a little less prejudiced against such crudities as buckets and spades.

Mr. Slade returned to Fenchurch Street station feeling like a boy who had consumed much sausage-roll, jam tart and strawberry ice. He took his seat in a third-class carriage, and was carried over and through all that ugliness of London's East End, Stepney, Plaistow, the Hams, Barking. Why Barking? Perhaps because there was an Isle of Dogs somewhere! But Mr. Slade's mood became suddenly more personal and poignant. It arrived, as moods will, without warning or sweet reasonableness. All these toys, and yet something was lacking, some intimate and precious quality which came only from the blood and the body of secret emotion.

Mr. Slade and the train were nearing the Laindon Hills before

the inwardness of that secret yearning revealed itself. What of his own child, Rose? Was there any human link left between them? Maybe, he had been nothing to her but an old codger who had cleaned boots and carried up coals, and waited on her at table. Queer thing life, that it should contrive to make you hand soup-plates to your own daughter! Assuredly, there had been moments when he and Rose had come together in a little world of their own, or rather it had been Rose's world, and somewhat out of joint. He had caressed with sympathy the troubled and nascent woman in her. But was not youth very much absorbed in its self, ready, no doubt, to accept sympathy like a box of chocolates, and to forget it when the box was empty?

Mr. Slade was troubled. He had become a little, lonely figure in the corner of his third-class carriage. There were yearnings in him that could not be appeased. Even his toy-shop possessed a significance other than what it seemed. His urge to provide toys for children, other people's children, might be no more than a subterfuge, emotional substitution, self-trickery. His own child was not his, and to fill that secret void he had persuaded himself to be a toy-merchant.

Yes, both he and Clara were combatants struggling for a particular prize, yet—neither of them could vanquish the other. He could not break faith with Clara, nor could she forget that he held a secret weapon that could kill the Golden Calf she worshipped. Clara, in a sense, did possess the body of her child, but who possessed her spirit? Yet that was an illusion. Who could possess the secret self of some other self? The wind bloweth as it listeth, especially so the wayward breath of youth. One could be nothing but an expectant and faithful weathercock.

Expectancy! That was the word. The significance of it came to James Slade suddenly. He would have to wait like a hermit in a cell, in that shop of his. Youth might come to him, or it might not.

XIX

MR. SLADE was learning to cook.

At the moment his activities as a chef were very elementary, and had not progressed beyond boiling an egg, frying bacon, or producing a Welsh rabbit. His more ambitious attempts had been disastrous and had gone to feed the neighbouring cats, or into the dustbin, and Mr. Slade was boiling an egg for his tea when the railway van rolled up and stopped outside his shop.

The bell rang, and James Slade, going out to investigate, found the vanman at his door with a Goods Delivery Sheet.

"Name of Slade?"

"Yes."

"Five cases, carriage paid. Where'll you have 'em?"

"In here, please."

The vanman proceeded to slide the cases over the tail-board of the van. They were massive cases, and caused Mr. Slade some astonishment.

"Can I help?"

"Well, they be a bit on the large size."

They were. In fact there was some doubt about the largest of them passing through the shop doorway.

"Please mind the paint, if you can."

"Right'o, gov'nor, you go in first and I'll watch the paint."

Mr. Slade staggered in backwards, with the vanman watching the door frame.

"Easy'o. Yes, she'll do it. Mind your fingers, gov'nor."

"Yes, she'll just do it."

"Have 'em on the counter?"

"No, on the floor."

"Mind your fingers. Easy does it."

With the five cases safely in the shop, Mr. Slade thanked

the vanman, gave him sixpence, and remembered his egg. Half the water in the little saucepan had boiled away and, glancing at the kitchen clock, Mr. Slade gathered that the process had been going on for twenty minutes.

"Well, well, it will be hard-boiled," thought Mr. Slade, "but what does it matter?"

He was hot and a little tremulous with labour and excitement.

Should he begin the great game of unpacking after tea? Why, most certainly. He could not keep his fingers off those nice new cases, and the sooner the shop was dressed, the sooner would the bread he had cast upon the waters float back to him. Leaving the tea-things to be dealt with later, he returned to the shop to gloat over those most exciting cubes of wood. Which should he open first? That big fellow there? Well and good. And then Mr. Slade discovered that he had not the where-withal to do the trick.

"Bless my soul! You old idiot!"

A hammer he did possess, a very modest hammer, but no weapon that could be used to prize up the nails. Could he borrow such a tool from Mr. Gates, the chemist next door? Oh, most probably. Mr. Gates must have had much experience with packing-cases. Mr. Gates's shop was open, and Mr. Gates himself behind the counter, a little, polished, precise person who wore nose nippers.

"Could you lend me a case opener?"

Mr. Gates could oblige him. He produced a tommy-bar and nail extractor, remarking as he handed over the tool, that he might need it to-morrow, and that an early return of it was essential.

"Much obliged, sir. You shall have it back in half an hour."

Mr. Slade got to work with expedition and enthusiasm. He prized up the lids of all five cases, and then hurried back to return the case-opener to its owner.

He felt like a boy at a bazaar with a Lucky Dip provoking

him. Should he begin upon the big fellow? A covering of old newspapers and straw tantalized his fingers. He removed this top-padding and discovered four nice red cardboard boxes with coloured labels. Clock-work trains. Mr. Slade removed one of the boxes and opened it upon the counter. Here were engine and carriages complete, and painted a gay green. The immortal child awoke in James Slade. He placed the box upon the floor and, squatting down, coupled up the carriages, wound the engine and attached it to the train. There was a whirr of wheels, and the train headed straight for the front door, and Mr. Slade made a dash for it, and guided the engine back to safety. Jolly fun—this! When the mechanism had run itself down, he re-wound the engine, and started the train on a second journey, and stood watching it as it buzzed across the floor. Again he had to dive and rescue it from colliding with a packing-case. The train came to rest within a yard of the shop door. A most successful trial run—this! Well, it was time for him to get on with the job and cease from being a small boy, but happening to glance at the glass panels of the shop door, he saw a figure there. Someone was watching him. That someone was—Rose.

James Slade stood quite still, gazing at his daughter. Had she been watching him fooling about with that toy train? But surely this might be a sign from God, the sign for which he had prayed, but had not dared to hope for. He had waited and his child had come to him. He smiled, and at the same instant a smile lit up the face outside the glass. James Slade made a sudden movement towards the door. He opened it.

"You caught me, my dear. Won't you come in?"

"May I, Mr. Slade?"

She slipped in, and he closed the door behind her.

"How long had you been standing out there?"

"I don't quite know."

"Was I crawling about on the floor?"

She nodded, laughed, and looked about her.

"Yes, you were."

"How very undignified. But toys are toys. I ought to be in socks, you know. All this has just arrived. So exciting."

"Are all those full of toys?"

"Yes. I was just going to unpack them."

She laid a hand on one of the cases.

"Could I help?"

"Why, yes, my dear. But aren't you—rather too old——"

"I hope not. Do let me help. I'd love to."

"And I'd love you to."

"What do we do? Dress all the shelves?"

"That's the idea."

"And the windows?"

Mr. Slade became abruptly grave and paternal.

"No, not the windows. I do that to-morrow. Young gentlewomen don't dress shop windows."

"Why not?"

"Prestige, my dear."

Mr. Slade began to remove the cardboard boxes from the big packing-case, only to find that Rose had gone off into what appeared to be a day dream. She was leaning against one of the counters, and to James Slade her eyes were like two dark flowers. What a comely creature was this daughter of his, and mysterious to him with all the bloom and mystery of youth. Where was the Clara in her? And did God give to each child a personality that was not flesh of the flesh of those who begot and bore her?

"Mr. Slade."

"Yes, my dear?"

"Why are there such a lot of things—which seem to be forbidden?"

That was a poser for James Slade. He stood holding one of the cardboard boxes as though he did not know what to do with it.

"Oh, well, you know, some things aren't good for us, like burning your fingers or eating too much strawberry ice."

"Yes, of course, but some people seem to be so fond of saying 'Don't'."

"Yes, horrid word, isn't it? 'Do' is so much better, but you can't get rid of all the 'don'ts'."

She turned her head, looked at him, saw him holding that cardboard box, and suddenly she laughed. The child came alive in her. She held out her hands for the box.

"But I'm forgetting. Do we open each box?"

"Well, when we feel like it. Just curiosity. But we will put them away on the shelves, my dear."

"You unpack, and I'll put away. Oh, Mr. Slade, how nice it would be if we could put some people away on the shelf! No, I don't mean for always, but just now and again."

"Or—into cupboards?"

"Yes, and shut the door."

Some impulse made her take off her hat and place it in a corner of one of the shelves. She turned and smiled at Mr. Slade, and her eyes said, "Now I'm at home and I'm ready. What fun it is going to be." And fun it was, for each box had to be opened and looked at before it was stowed away. Mr. Slade took off his coat, and worked in his shirt-sleeves in a growing flood of packing material which rose gradually to his knees.

"What, more soldiers?"

"Yes, more soldiers, I'm afraid. Pretty little fellows, aren't they?"

"French ones, aren't they? I like the red coats best."

"That's as it should be, my dear. Let's try this other case. It looks to me more like dolls."

Dolls they proved to be, all packed in nice cardboard coffins, blondes and brunettes with staring, glassy eyes. These costumed and more lordly ladies occupied the upper part of the case, and below them reposed mere common wenches in a state of grotesque nudity.

"Class distinction even in dolls," said Mr. Slade. "Hullo, here is one who is leaking."

He passed the creature to Rose.

"Sawdust escaping. Where is the—wound?"

Rose, examining the doll, gave a charming little giggle, and turned the thing over in her hand.

"Oh, there!" said Mr. Slade. "How very unladylike! Better put her aside for repairs, my dear."

"I can do it for you if you have a needle and thread."

"We won't bother just now."

The work went on until the shelves were stacked with toys, and the floor was a litter of waste paper. The little shop had become a patchwork of colour, a live place to delight the heart of a child. Mr. Slade was happy and perspiring. They emptied the last case.

He stood knee-deep in packing material and surveyed the scene.

"Well, that's a good job done."

Rose, moving a box aside, perched herself on a counter.

"How did you think of everything?"

Mr. Slade ran his fingers through his hair.

"Oh, I don't know. Just let my fancy ramble."

"Have you ever kept a shop before?"

"No, my dear."

Rose became dreamy.

"I—almost—think I'd like to keep a shop."

"There are shops—and—shops," said Mr. Slade.

"Oh, yes, not a butcher's or a fishmonger's. When are you going to dress the windows?"

"In a day or two. Dozens and dozens of price tickets to be filled in and attached. Oh, yes, I shall be very busy. Good heavens, do you know what the time is?"

"No."

"Nearly seven o'clock."

His daughter slid off the counter with a face that had become serious.

"Gracious! They'll be——"

"Quite so," said Mr. Slade.

She paused, stood irresolute, and then she turned and kissed him.

"I—have—enjoyed myself. We seem to get on together. I wonder why."

Mr. Slade was looking a little flushed.

"Oh, well, perhaps—because—— You'll miss the soup!"

She dashed to the door, opened it, and turned to smile at him.

"I'll come and buy something. Perhaps I'll be your first customer."

"You shall be. But, my dear, your hat!"

She had forgotten her hat. She swept in on her slim legs, snatched the hat from the shelf, donned it with a certain pretty jauntiness, waved to him and fled.

Mr. Slade sat down on the counter on the very spot where she had been sitting. So, the rose had bloomed in his garden, and the unknown child had kissed the unknowable father! What had she said? "We seem to get on together. I wonder why?" Mr. Slade could imagine his God indulging in a benignant chuckle, and poking St. Peter in the ribs. What a divine joke! "The girl wonders why she gets on with her father!" But children do not always feel in sympathy with their parents. Oh, no, sir! Perhaps just because they are parents. Mr. Slade's face had an almost shy radiance. Was it possible that after all he had the advantage of Clara, and that the pride of possession lost you the treasure you possessed?

Mr. Slade's left hand touched something on the counter, the body of the nude puppet with the leaky skin. He glanced at the object, gathered it in his hand, and gazed whimsically at the rent in its poor posterior. Could a doll sacrifice its sawdust to—destiny? Mr. Slade descended from the counter, and going in search of a needle and cotton, he cobbled up the gaping wound. It was not a very workmanlike job, but it would suffice, and the victim had somehow become for him a saintly

object that was not for sale. He sat Miss Sawdust on the kitchen mantelpiece next to the kitchen clock, her absurd and rather clumsy legs sticking out, her blue eyes staring under a thatch of yellow hair.

Then, Mr. Slade remembered all that litter on the shop floor. What was to be done with it? Why, of course, he would burn it, light a bonfire, a sacrificial flame. He felt like a bonfire and a bottle of beer. Both were accorded him. He carried all that rubbish out into the back garden, and piling it on a weedy patch of soil, set it alight. The blaze was hearty and symbolical, and flared just as the dusk began to descend. The chemist's lady, going to pull down a bedroom blind, saw a little, dark, gnomelike figure dancing round the bonfire, a rake in one hand, a glass of beer in the other.

How very ridiculous! What a strange neighbour! Was Mr. Slade addicted to drink?

XX

I

MR. SLADE found the dressing of his shop windows to be a much more public business. One window was to be male, and the other female, and Messrs. Pawley and Beckwith had constructed for him two tiers of shelves sloping backwards and upwards like those cast-iron contraptions which display potted plants in a conservatory. There was just sufficient room for Mr. Slade to squeeze past these shelves into each window, and he found it simpler and less hard on the knees of his trousers to push a dozen exhibits on to the raised floor of the window and then climb in and arrange them. Being a little gentleman he began on the window for little ladies, and his labour commenced immediately after breakfast. The first hour was fairly tranquil, but as the day and Southfleet got busy, Mr. Slade became in-

creasingly conscious of himself as a kind of human show-piece. It really was extraordinary how many citizens of his acquaintance passed along the High Street that morning. Some passed, looked in, smiled and nodded. He saw lips move, and heard faint voices. Most of them said, "You—are—busy, Mr. Slade." And James Slade began to feel quite self-conscious about it, and tried to keep his back to the sheet of glass as much as possible.

Someone's knuckles rapped on the glass. Mr. Slade turned to look, and found Mr. Golightly nodding at him, a sleek and benign patron of the arts of trade. Mr. Golightly's mouth was saying something, and Mr. Slade felt it to be his duty to speak with Mr. Golightly. He emerged backwards, opened the door, and wished Mr. Golightly good morning.

"Ha, window-dressing, Mr. Slade. I've done it in my time. It can be quite—embarrassing."

"Yes, almost like one of those dreams, sir, when you find yourself at a party in your night-shirt. May I thank you for your very great help."

"Ah, I'm glad my introduction carried weight. You seem to have quite a nice selection."

"I have, sir."

"Splendid," and Mr. Golightly beamed upon him and strode smoothly on.

Even Mr. Sawkins appeared. He stood, staring in, and sucking his teeth. He stared so long and so rudely that Mr. Slade became irritated. A voice from the eggy beard burred at him. It said something about this window-dressing being a funny job for a man of such mature years."

Mr. Slade shouted, "I beg your pardon."

Mr. Sawkins shouted back.

Then Mr. Slade made a face at Mr. Sawkins, and Mr. Sawkins drew away in high offence. Nor was Mr. Slade as remorseful as he should have been. He planted a doll on one of the shelves, and said to her, "Tell him to go and break another egg in his mothy beard!"

Then came—Clara. Mr. Slade was arranging various exhibits about a gay posy of dolls. Mrs. Pomeroy paused. She made herself pause and confront this vulgar business, and a pair of lorgnettes, had she possessed them, should have been focused on Mr. Slade. Mrs. Pomeroy was to be known among the ironic as "The Duchess of Highfield", and she surveyed Mr. Slade in his glass case with distaste and Roman-nosed hauteur. This old fool who appeared to be enjoying second childhood! Well, in all probability the idiot would lose his money, and be compelled to accept her final terms. She would plant him peacefully and harmlessly in some London suburb.

Mr. Slade, struck between the shoulder-blades by that concentrated stare, turned suddenly about, and discovered Clara on the pavement. Mr. Slade had in his hand one of those ridiculous baubles that used to be given to infants, a sort of miniature bone umbrella-stick hung with bells. Mr. Slade smiled and nodded at Clara, and shook the bells at her. They seemed to emit a thin, musical giggle.

"Good morning, madam."

Mrs. Pomeroy, like Mr. Sawkins before her, took offence and with a freezing stare, gathered her dignity and passed on. Mr. Slade watched her. Clara's bustle wagged itself in angry protest. She had a most expressive posterior.

"Hoity-toity!" said Mr. Slade, and went on with the dressing of his window.

Then, came the children. Schooling was over for the morning, and Mr. Slade became a fish in a glass tank against whose transparent surface small faces flattened themselves. Yet, somehow, Mr. Slade was not embarrassed by these children.

"Oo-er, I'd like that one."

"Which one?"

"Her in the pink frock."

The boys seemed to think it rather a poor show, and they scurried off and left their dawdling sisters. Mr. Slade had nearly

completed the feminine window. He emerged, opened the shop door, and addressed the girls.

"Not quite ready for you yet, my dears."

"When will it be open, Mr. Slade?"

"To-morrow, I hope."

He walked across the pavement and, standing in the roadway, contemplated his handiwork. Yes, by jumping Jehosaphat—the shop was gay!

Mr. Slade received his first customer at about three o'clock that afternoon. Mr. Slade had begun to dress the boys' window, and though the shop was not yet open to the public, when a particular lady came to the door, which was locked, Mr. Slade scrambled out of his show-case and unlocked the door. If there was one person in Southfleet to whom all the town was ready to unlock doors, that person was Lucy Richmond.

"I'm afraid I am trespassing, Mr. Slade."

"Not at all, madam, not at all. Please come in."

He reclosed the door, and hurried to put a chair forward for this lovely person. Mrs. Richmond sat down, and looked about her, and when she looked at a thing it seemed to gather an enhanced value.

"What fun for you, Mr. Slade."

Mr. Slade bowed to her. "Thank you madam. It is."

"Almost you make me wish that I was seven years old."

"Perhaps you are—seven, madam."

"Perhaps I am."

Her eyes were such happy eyes. They were eyes that would never grow old. Yes, Mrs. Richmond was a very lovely person.

"Can I serve you in any way, madam?"

"I want a doll. Could you let me have one. I had very nearly forgotten a godchild's birthday."

"With pleasure, madam. What is your fancy? Blonde or brunette."

She laughed.

"How happy could I be with either!"

Mr. Slade completed the couplet.

"Were the other fair charmer away."

There was no need for him to ransack the window. A row of dolls sat on one of the shelves, and Mr. Slade bowed to them.

"Ladies, forward, please."

Mrs. Richmond turned her chair.

"May I see that one in the strawberry frock?"

Mr. Slade reached for the lady and, holding her by the waist, exhibited the doll to Mrs. Richmond. She smiled at him.

"There are—other ways, Mr. Slade."

"Just how, madam?"

Mrs. Richmond took the doll from him, and slipping a hand under the creature's frock from behind, smiled at Mr. Slade.

"Oh, I see, madam. One doesn't clutch a lady by the middle——"

And then he coughed and blushed. Nor did you thrust a hand up and under a gentlewoman's petticoat. But dolls were different, of course!

Mrs. Richmond turned the doll this way and that, like a bird perched on her wrist.

"Does she undress, Mr. Slade?"

"I really don't know, madam. My investigations have not proceeded——"

And then they both laughed.

Mr. Slade took down another doll, a blonde in blue, and was careful to display her in the proper professional manner. His eyes were watching Mrs. Richmond's face when the door opened, and his second customer appeared.

Rose! Well, well, for an old fellow he was doing very well this afternoon, with the two Beauties of Southfleet gathered in his parlour. Moreover, to James Slade this was an almost God-given coincidence, a sign—if not in the heavens, then in

his shop. Yet, the occasion was not without its trepidations. How did the mother of Charles and his daughter mix?

"Oh, Mrs. Richmond; you are here first?"

Mr. Slade would have said that the unique quality that characterized both these creatures was the radiance they seemed to bring with them into his shop. Mrs. Richmond was smiling up at Rose, and Rose was smiling down at her. They looked as though they were ready to kiss and be kissed.

"Have I stolen your doll, dear?"

"Have you chosen the blue one?"

"No, I think I prefer Miss Strawberry."

Mr. Slade rubbed his hands together as though washing them in happy unction.

"But I want a gentleman doll."

"Do you, my dear? Bless my soul, I don't think I have such a creature. What a lapse!"

"Who is it for, Rose?"

"Little Jenny Hooper."

"My god-daughter. But does Jenny——?"

"Jenny seems to love a sailor."

"How forward of her! But I have an idea. If we took Miss Bluebell and cut her hair and put her in a sailor suit, she—I mean he and Miss Strawberry would make a pretty pair."

"Have you got a sailor suit, Mr. Slade?"

"I'm ashamed to say I haven't."

"Well, I could make one," said Lucy Richmond. "It would not take long."

"Would you? But why should you bother, Mrs. Richmond?"

"It isn't any trouble. Can I have the doll, Mr. Slade?"

"Of course, madam. As she is?"

"No, in a——"

"I see. In a state of Nature, madam! Perhaps Miss Pomeroy will act as nurse."

Rose laughed.

"I believe you are shy, Mr. Slade!"

James Slade made of the male window a veritable Place d'Armes. He paraded the troops very early in the morning, for the arranging of them necessitated his kneeling or lying on his tummy while he removed the soldiers from their boxes and massed them below the tiers of shelves. Here were Guardsmen and French infantry of the Line, Zouaves, Green Russians, Cavalry, guns and limbers, white bell-tents, and a miniature fort. It was a grand display, and boys came to flatten their faces against the window and gaze covetously upon these little men of lead.

But in that first week Mr. Slade made a number of discoveries.

Firstly, that "The Toy Mart" promised to become a kind of Children's Club.

Secondly, that his shop was too much a luxury shop, and that a selection of twopenny toys was needed.

Thirdly, that Free Sweets for the favoured meant sweets for everybody.

Fourthly, that the shop promised to make a slave of him, and that cooking and bed-making and what not, kept him going from dawn to dusk, and that he was quite unable to get out of doors.

Something would have to be done about it.

But—what?

Well, was it not obvious that he needed help, a woman to run the house for him, while he gave all his time to "The Toy Mart," and took his exercise when the shop was closed?

But a woman about the place!

Mr. Slade rubbed his chin, and regarded with resignation the day's collection of crockery waiting to be washed up and put away. Peace, perfect peace; but would such a state continue with a woman in the house? Dash it all, why could not cups and

saucers and plates wash themselves up, and beds get themselves made? Then, there was a fortnight's washing waiting to go to the laundry, and he was out of butter and tea. For two days he had not been out of doors, and when he had rushed forth after closing the shop, all other shops were closed.

Well, what was he going to do about it? Admit some Eve into his Garden of Eden, or continue to exist like a half-starved old Tom Cat? Could he close the shop from noon till three? No, that would be bad for trade. But supposing he managed to persuade some respectable person to come in daily and do for him? Where was he to find such a woman?

Yes, undoubtedly he needed advice, but in such a situation neither Mr. Grigson nor Mr. Golightly could help him. This was a she-problem. It could be dealt with only by a petticoat person. And then he thought of Mrs. Eliza.

The very woman! Mrs. Eliza might know of some reliable lady who could cook and wash up and make beds, and set him free to concentrate upon the shop.

Mr. Slade seized upon the inspiration and, when the closing hour had come, he put on his hat and overcoat and walked out into the autumn dusk to visit Caroline Terrace. Dear old Simple Simon that he was, he did not suspect that the most elementary of man's problems cannot be solved without interference from the emotions, and yet it was this very simplicity that was to protect him. James Slade knew nothing of secret and middle-aged tendernesses, and of a sacred teacup preserved in Mrs. Eliza's top drawer. Mrs. Eliza might possess an incipient beard and a formidable front but she was a woman.

Mr. Slade slipped silently down the area steps and rang the kitchen bell. He rather wanted to see Mrs. Eliza alone, and without advertising his affairs to all the other wenches, so when Bertha opened the door to him, he raised his hat to her and asked if Mrs. Eliza was in.

"Why, yes, Dad. Come in."

Mr. Slade felt embarrassed.

"No, I mustn't, my dear. Work to do. I wonder if Mrs. Eliza would give me a minute out here?"

"Yes, Dad, I'll tell her."

Mrs. Eliza could not confess that she "Felt all funny" when Mr. Slade's message was delivered to her. Such matronly emotion had to be concealed. She arose, and walked solidly out of the kitchen, pausing in the passage to remove her cap. Meetings at the area door—and at this hour—were flavoured with romance, and Mrs. Eliza's heart was like a Christmas pudding that was being stirred with a wooden spoon.

"Why, Mr. Slade, it's you!"

Mr. Slade bobbed his hatless head at her.

"I've come to you, Mrs. Eliza, for advice."

Mrs. Eliza drew a deep breath, and remembered to close the area door. If a proposal was in the air she did not want those girls listening and giggling.

"Why, of course, Mr. Slade. Anything—for you."

Mr. Slade cleared his throat.

"I've been wondering, Eliza, whether you could find me a—woman."

Find him a woman! Well—really! But—then—of course, Mr. Slade could not quite mean what the vulgar-minded might assume. Besides, wasn't she a woman?

"What for, Mr. Slade?"

"Well, you know, Eliza, I'm finding things a bit too much for me, looking after both the shop and the house."

"Haven't you got anybody to do for you, James?"

"Not a soul."

"Dear, dear, that's too bad. And you knowing nothing about cooking."

Mrs. Eliza's voice was the voice of a dove, but Mr. Slade merely felt that she was being sympathetic.

"I thought you might know of someone who could come in for a few hours each day."

"Don't you want anybody to live in?"

"I'd rather not, you know."

Mrs. Eliza felt somewhat baffled and chilled. If this was a way of proposing it seemed to be rather subtle and circuitous. But—then—of course Mr. Slade might be feeling shy.

"I—quite—understand, James."

"You see—there are women and women. I'm an old bachelor, Eliza, and please God, I shall never be anything else. And any sort of woman might make a nuisance of herself."

"Any sort—would, James."

"Yes, that's why I thought of asking the advice of an old friend."

Mrs. Eliza drew a breath and held it, for the truth had become abruptly obvious to her that this meeting in the area was not flavoured with romance. An old friend, indeed! Her disillusionment was so acute that for the moment her matronly juices seemed to turn sour in her, and being angry with herself and with everything she felt angry with Mr. Slade.

"I don't know that I'd like to advise a man about a thing like that."

Mr. Slade was surprised. Why had Eliza's voice suddenly gone throaty and formal?

"Wouldn't you, Eliza?"

"No, I wouldn't. You never know what a woman might do."

"No."

"Cooped up with a man who's as innocent as you are, Mr. Slade. I may be an old friend—but—there are limits."

Mr. Slade was beginning to feel perplexed and uncomfortable. Had he offended Eliza, and if so—how? He essayed to make a joke of the problem.

"You think she might—seduce me, Eliza? Or that the cat would eat up the canary?"

Mrs. Eliza's bosom heaved. Love was not a thing to joke about, especially when you were close on fifty, and a man could be so frivolous about it. Mrs. Eliza felt compelled to be shocked.

"You shouldn't use such a word to me, Mr. Slade. It isn't

a nice word, and I've got my feelings about things. If I were you I'd go to a proper registry office, yes, I would. Miss Pinhook is the woman for you. Excoose me, but I've got the supper to see to."

Mr. Slade found himself standing alone in the dark area. Now, what in the name of Heaven had made Eliza ruffle up like that? What had he said that could have offended her? Seduction? Well, after all, both he and she—as old friends and elderly friends, could have a little joke together.

Mr. Slade re-climbed the area steps, vaguely conscious of having put his foot into something—but into what?

XXI

I

THE Admiral was dead and buried, and Highfield House for sale, but so swift was Mrs. Pomeroy's pounce, that the property could not be said to have come on the market. She purchased it for the sum of three thousand pounds, and for six months she was to be the happiest of women. Her immense energy was let loose upon the place. It was to be redecorated from top to bottom, but at the most economic figure, and Messrs. Pawley and Beckwith's estimate was the one to be accepted. The Admiral had left a billiard table behind him, and Mrs. Pomeroy purchased the table. It was a symbol of her ascent into the new world. She could picture the Hallards and the Gages and the Ransomes pushing the ivory balls about after dining with her and her daughter.

It so happened that on the very evening of Mrs. Eliza's disillusionment Mrs. Pomeroy rang her bell. Bertha, who answered it, was told that Mrs. Pomeroy had an announcement to make to her staff, and that they were to mount the stairs to her private

room. Mrs. Eliza led the procession. They found Mrs. Pomeroy in purple velvet, and sitting in state before the fire with her daughter in attendance. Mrs. Pomeroy was gracious and smiling.

"Eliza and you girls, I think it right to let you know that I am retiring, and that the hotel will be for sale. You may decide to stay on, or you may not. I wish to thank you all for the service you have given me."

Mrs. Pomeroy was enjoying herself. The moment was dressed in purple velvet. Success could be advertised—even to your staff.

There was silence, a silence that might have suggested that these menials were properly impressed. Mrs. Pomeroy sat and waited as though expecting someone to express regret, but Eliza was the only one to find her voice and if Eliza sounded a little peevish it was not because she and Mrs. Pomeroy were parting

"Well, I don't know, ma'am. I'm not so young as I was."

"Of course, Eliza, you can come with me. I have bought Highfield House. It will be a much easier place."

"I suppose it would be, ma'am."

"And I shall need a parlour-maid and a housemaid."

Mrs. Pomeroy, having played for her contrasts, smiled upon her maids.

"The same wages, of course."

Mrs. Eliza, looking stubborn, rubbed her large chin.

"I'll think it over, ma'am."

"So will I," said Bertha.

They returned to the kitchen, and Mrs. Eliza sat down by the fire and rubbed her knees.

"Drat my rheumatics! Going with her? No, not me."

Her decision was shared by the others. The hotel was not a bad sort of place, and it might be a much better place without Mrs. P. And there were the tips to be considered. The staff decided that it had enjoyed a surfeit of the Pomeroy regime.

Mrs. Eliza went to bed with her rheumatics and a sudden feeling of remorse. She enjoyed a change of heart. She did not covet a new place such as Highfield at her time of life. Lowfield would be more appropriate. And there was poor old Mr. Slade alone in a house, and trying to do his own cooking, poor old dear. Eliza felt that she had been harsh to Mr. Slade. Becoming sentimental at her age, too! Silly old fool! If Mr. Slade was not the marrying sort, well, there were advantages in being single. Besides, if she made the old man comfortable, he might come to think—— Yes, you never knew. Eliza might put romance away in her bottom drawer, but that would not prevent her from taking it out again if she found that a man was willing.

So, Eliza took French leave next morning, and appeared in Mr. Slade's shop while he was engaged in selling a box of soldiers for somebody's birthday.

"Good morning, Mrs. Eliza. Won't you sit down?"

Mrs. Eliza sat down, and when the lady customer had departed, she made her apology.

"I'm afraid I was a bit short with you, Dad, last night. Fact is—my rheumatics was worrying me."

"That's all right, Mrs. Eliza."

"No, it isn't all right. I lay awake thinking of you trying to do everything. I said to myself—he'll get indigestion. Yes, you know you do, Mr. Slade, if you don't get proper time for your meals. She told us last night she was giving up the hotel, and she wants me to go to the new place."

"And shall you?"

"Not likely. If you want a woman to do for you, Mr. Slade, I'd be willing to come to you. You see—I know your ways, and I shan't be a noosance."

"I'm sure you wouldn't be a nuisance, Eliza. I think I should be very glad to have you. It's quite a nice little kitchen, and there's a bedroom at the back. I'm settling into the first floor front as a sitting-room. The stairs aren't too bad."

Mrs. Eliza breathed in deeply.

"I know my place, Mr. Slade, and a gentleman when I see him. They do say in Southfleet that you keep shop like a gentleman."

Mr. Slade laughed and looked coy.

"It is very kind of them, I'm sure, Eliza."

2

Mrs. Eliza gave Mrs. Pomeroy a month's notice, but she did not tell that lady that she was to become Mr. Slade's house-keeper, cook, hand-maid and mender of socks. Silence was the best policy with a person like Mrs. Pomeroy, and had the lady known who had stolen her cook from her she might have accused Mr. Slade of enticement.

"I'm sorry, Eliza. I thought that after all these years you might feel loyal to your old mistress."

Eliza did not say she was sorry. In fact she said very little.

"With my rheumatics, ma'am, I don't feel like a big place."

"Just as you please, Eliza."

Yet, during that month of waiting, Mr. Slade was not to be without help in the house. Eliza persuaded a married sister to go in for two hours daily, and wash up and cook and make Mr. Slade's bed. Eliza regarded Sister Jane as an insurance, or a broody hen who would keep the nest warm for her without any idea of remaining there in perpetuity. Mr. Slade was to be protected from designing females, and Eliza did not regard herself as such.

So, Mr. Slade was able to take a little exercise after he had closed the shop, especially on Sunday afternoons. He spent the morning in church. Jane managed to cook him a Sunday dinner, and afterwards Mr. Slade would put his feet up, smoke a pipe, and indulge in forty winks. After tea he liked to visit Mr. Truslove's grave, and leave flowers there before taking a brisk walk. He liked to go down through Caroline Gardens to the parade, and along it to the Old Town and past the saltings

to the Coast Guard station. Sometimes he walked on the pier, and filled himself with sea air after six days in the shop.

Life sprang a surprise on Mr. Slade in Caroline Gardens. Mr. Kemp, one of the gardeners, stopped him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Slade."

"Yes, my friend."

"Be you a subscriber?"

"No. I'm afraid I'm not."

"I've got to do my duty, Mr. Slade, though it don't give me no pleasure doin' it with certain people. Y'see, when you was at the hotel——"

"Of course. I hadn't thought of that. Well, I should like to be a subscriber, Mr. Kemp. How much will it cost me?"

"Ten bob a year."

"Do I pay you?"

"You can pay me, Mr. Slade. I'll pass it on, and the trustees will give you a ticket."

So, Mr. Slade became a subscriber, and was free to walk or sit, as he pleased, in the gardens above the sea. This new kind of freedom seemed cheap at ten shillings, and for such a sum it appeared that you could be promoted to a new social order. You were a person who paid for a particular privilege, not one of those who was paid by the week.

Society attempted to thrust yet another privilege upon the proprietor of "The Toy Mart". Mr. Slade continued to occupy the same obscure back seat at St. John's Church. He would be one of the last to leave, and one Sunday the verger plucked him by the sleeve.

"Wouldn't you prefer a private sitting, Mr. Slade?"

Mr. Slade had not considered such promotion.

"Well, I don't know. I think I am all right where I am."

The verger was not of that opinion. A man in Mr. Slade's position ought to go up higher, and pay for the privilege. The church funds had to be considered.

"There's a corner seat, in Mr. Messom's pew."

Mr. Slade did not desire to sit in Mr. Messom's pew, and he said so.

"No, I think I will stay where I am."

"Just as you please, Mr. Slade. If you prefer a—free—seat——"

So that was it! When you became a man of property you were expected to pay for the performance. And did God check off the list of His supporters and accord special favour to those who feed Him by taking a private pew?

Mr. Slade was feeling naughty about it.

"I do put a shilling in the plate, you know."

The verger took the joke sourly. If a man was so mean, and had no proper appreciation of his duties as a churchgoer and a citizen, there was nothing more to be said about it. So, Mr. Slade remained in his obscure back-seat among those who were not asked to go up higher.

3

Mrs. Eliza's trunk arrived on a hand-cart, and was taken in at the side door. She and the lad who had acted as porter carried the trunk up to the little back bedroom, and Mrs. Eliza, having paid the lad, sat down on her bed. Well, here she was in her new home and feeling a little flustered, for, in passing the shop, she had seen Mr. Golightly and Mr. Slade standing in the doorway in friendly conversation. Mr. Slade had been to his tailor and was wearing a very presentable new suit, and looking, Eliza had thought, quite the equal of Mr. Golightly, and Mr. Golightly was an important person in Southfleet.

"All right, old man—supper on Sunday at eighty-thirty."

So Mr. Golightly had called Mr. Slade "Old man", and Mr. Slade was supping at No. 17 Caroline Terrace! Mr. Slade might not be aware of these subtle indications, or of the gradations that were elevating him into a civic person, but to Mrs. Eliza they were obvious.

"Now, Eliza Cotgrove, just you remember you are his cook, and don't get silly bees in your bonnet."

Mrs. Eliza removed that self-same bonnet, heaved a sigh, and laid the bonnet on the bed.

But Eliza had brought a surprising piece of information with her, and when Mr. Slade poked his head into the kitchen to welcome her, he found her, sleeves rolled up, and making pastry with an air of self-chastened gravity.

"Well, Eliza, very glad to see you here. Is everything all right?"

"Quite, Mr. Slade."

"If there is anything you want, tell me."

"Yes, sir."

"No complications, I hope? Was—Mrs. Pomeroy——?"

"That's all over, Mr. Slade."

"Oh, in what way?"

"She's moving out at the end of the month. The hotel's sold."

"Is that so."

Mrs. Eliza was busy with the rolling-pin.

"You'd never guess, Mr. Slade."

"Guess what?"

"Who's bought it."

"Who?"

"Mr. Sawkins."

"Sawkins!"

"Yes. And a nice mean mess he'll make of it. Suppose he thinks he can put his feet up anywhere, and take the best chair by the fire."

Mr. Slade chuckled.

"Well, well, well! There is one thing I am glad about."

"What's that, sir?"

"I haven't to clean Mr. Sawkins's boots."

"Pooh!" said Eliza, "I should say so. He's not fit to clean yours."

Autumn leaves were falling. They lay upon the lawns of Highfield House, and upon the paths and the playground of Caroline Gardens. Oak leaves drifting and floating past the Highfield windows, might have peered in like little sprites and beheld the rich autumnal colour of Mrs. Pomeroy's fancy. The dining-room was old gold and maroon, the drawing-room the colour of cherry leaves in autumn. In the bedrooms Mrs. P's. fancy was more summerlike, crushed strawberry for her daughter, and for herself a suggestion of Rose du Barry flecked with golden *Fleur de Lys*. The billiard-room was solemn bronze, the library a contemplative amber. Mr. Golightly was providing the curtains, velvet of various splendours. Twice weekly Mrs. Pomeroy took a return first-class ticket to London to purchase carpets, linen, silver, cutlery, furniture. She was a very busy and a very dignified lady. Salesmen were silk to her velvet. The old timber-yard had been sold for the figure she had demanded. Other little ventures in real estate were proving profitable. Mr. Sawkins had paid up the purchase price of the Caroline Hotel, and Mrs. Pomeroy could count upon capital amounting to some thirty-five thousand pounds, and an income of fifteen hundred pounds a year. Her fancy floated to other altitudes. Messrs. Gregg and Gowland, carriage-makers and wheelwrights, had a second-hand victoria for sale. Mrs. Pomeroy purchased it and had it re-painted, black with yellow wheels, and new fawn coloured upholstery fitted to the interior. Someone was commissioned to find and to buy for her a couple of good carriage-horses, preferably greys. She proposed to employ a groom and a gardener. Her establishment should be the smartest and the most up-to-date in Southfleet.

There was but one fly in her honeypot, and the insect was, of course, James Slade. It would have been easy for her to leave Southfleet, and exercise her social ambitions in some strange watering-place, but she had set out to conquer Southfleet, and

conquer it she would. Already her feet were preparing to cross the sacred thresholds of the town's most exclusive clique. A Hallard marriage was to crown her efforts.

Meanwhile, James Slade was thinking of Christmas and its decorations. He was dreaming of festoons of coloured paper, Chinese lanterns, and a ten-foot Christmas tree complete with candles, glass balls, white wool and artificial frost. As a financial concern "The Toy Mart" was prospering, and Mr. Slade was returning money to the bank.

Mrs. Pomeroy sometimes passed the shop. She would pause to look in its windows and through the glass panel of the door. She hoped for emptiness and found it not. James Slade was always doing business, and never once did Mrs. Pomeroy surprise the shop in a state of nudity. How very annoying! Had Mr. Slade been able to squander the proceeds of that wretched legacy she could have resumed the role of the magnanimous autocrat, and imposed upon a potential pauper terms that would have retained him in distant obscurity. But if James Slade prospered? Oh, well, prosperity might satisfy his silly old soul. But she did confess to herself in secret that though revenge might be sweet, it was not always profitable.

Mr. Slade had fallen to Fireworks. Christmas was not yet, and that other festival beloved of children preceded it. In fact fireworks were forced upon Mr. Slade by the young. They came in with their pennies and arranged their little faces along the counter.

"Haven't you got any fireworks, Mr. Slade?"

"No, my dear."

"Aren't you going to have any fireworks?"

"Well, perhaps."

"Or masks?"

Mr. Slade began to realize that he was failing his clients. He would have to go up to London and buy fireworks and masks, and shut up the shop for the afternoon, for Eliza's arithmetic was not her strong point, and she was apt to be tart

with children. But before Mr. Slade set upon this mission, someone called at the shop, and that someone was Mr. Charles Richmond.

"Got any fireworks, Mr. Slade?"

"No, I'm afraid I haven't."

"But, I say, there is not a respectable squib in the place."

"How very disgraceful! And what are respectable squibs like, Mr. Charles?"

Charles laughed. Old Slade was a jolly old beggar, and he understood things.

"Well, I want some real rousers. I'm going to be home for the Fifth."

"I'm afraid, sir, mischief is in the air."

"Oh, just a back garden show to cheer up the cats. I suppose I'll have to——"

"I'm buying fireworks, Mr. Charles. Do you happen to know of a good place?"

"Yes, rather. Cocks's in Cheapside."

"Right you are, sir, I'll go there. And you want some super-squibs?"

"Yes, a dozen. If I can get the pater on to it—I've got an idea."

"I'm sure you have lots of ideas, Mr. Charles."

"Yes, don't give it away. We're going to have a blaze in Caroline Gardens. Get all the kids we know in, and some of the old——"

"Cats, sir."

Charles crinkled up his freckled nose just as he had done as a small boy.

"Chinese crackers, Mr. Slade, bouncing about under——"

"Precise petticoats. How naughty of you, Mr. Charles!"

"I believe you would be quite ready to chuck a few, Mr. Slade."

"Perhaps, perhaps not."

"You had better come along to my party."

So, Mr. Slade travelled up to London, and as it happened, by the same train as Mrs. Pomeroy, but not in the same class. They had passed each other on the platform, and Mr. Slade had raised his hat to the lady.

"Good afternoon, madam."

"Good afternoon, Slade."

Mrs. Pomeroy took a cab to Tottenham Court Road, but Mr. Slade went on foot to Cheapside. That casual clash upon the platform had set Mrs. Pomeroy's temper on edge, and spoilt the serenity of an afternoon's shopping. Had there been irony in the way James Slade had addressed her and raised his hat? Bothersome little creature! But Mr. Slade was in the best of tempers. He squandered quite a considerable sum upon fireworks and masks, and invited himself to tea at an Aerated Bread shop

"Can I have a muffin, my dear?"

Mr. Slade was getting into the way of my dearing everybody and his benignity was such that he might slip into the sacrilege of my dearing Clara. He had his muffin.

Three days later the army was withdrawn from the masculine window, and it became gay with grotesque masks and every sort of firework, rockets, bundles of squibs, golden rain, crackers, Catherine Wheels, Roman Candles. Mr. Slade was kept very busy, especially so by the small sixpenny shoppers who were determined to make six pennies go as far as possible.

Mr. Charlie Richmond came in for his squibs, and was also the purchaser of a bearded mask and a fine collection of pyrotechnical sundries.

"The pater has fallen to the joke. Six o'clock in Caroline Gardens, Mr. Slade."

Mr. Slade chuckled.

"I'd better wear a mask. Incognito, you know."

"Good idea! I'll try and persuade the pater to do the same. It's going to be fun, I think."

"I should think so, Mr. Charles."

So the great Dr. Richmond could appreciate a rag, and remember the uproarious days of his apprenticeship to Medicine.

XXII

I

CHARLES RICHMOND'S masked party was to be other than it seemed, and to Mr. Slade almost tragedy in comedy, Eros suddenly grown carnal man among the children. That the Trustees of Caroline Gardens deigned to permit such a party was a sop to Fate, and though Dr. Richmond could not permit himself to wear a mask, he presented his son with two golden sovereigns as a contribution towards the display. Charles was back at Guys, and it was his mother who called on Mr. Slade with a list of her son's needs, and it was a long one.

"I am afraid, Mr. Slade, we shall almost empty your shop."

Mr. Slade was very happy when serving this Lovely Person. Almost a shop chair seemed no adequate throne for her. He dashed up into his sitting-room and returned with a cushion.

"Permit me, madam."

Mrs. Richmond accepted the cushion, not because she needed it, but as though Mr. Slade had presented her with a bouquet.

"My son has written out a list."

"I hope I shall be able to supply—everything. May I have the list, madam?"

She laid it on the counter, and Mr. Slade bowed his head over it. He had no baldness to conceal, but a rather fine head of hair which was turning white.

"Three dozen squibs, three dozen golden rain, twelve rockets, two dozen Roman Candles, two dozen Catherine Wheels, three dozen Chinese Crackers, a dozen masks. If I may say so, madam, Mr. Charles does not do things by halves."

Mrs. Richmond smiled at Mr. Slade.

"Yes. I am afraid Charles is—lavish."

"Might I be allowed to call him generous, madam?"

"So, you don't believe in carefulness, Mr. Slade?"

"I do and I don't, madam. If I profit by your son's lavishness, I am also—cheered—by his spirit."

What an unusual old shopman was this! Mrs. Richmond was observing his hands. They were less toil-worn than of old, and meticulously clean. Yes, sensitive hands.

"Can you manage all this, Mr. Slade?"

"Perfectly, madam. I can put in another order to my suppliers."

"Please don't bother to deliver. I will send Howell round."

"Thank you, madam."

"How much do I owe you?"

"It will take a little working out, madam. May I send the bill with the parcels?"

Mrs. Richmond rose.

"Yes, please do."

Mr. Slade hastened to open the door for her, and stepped out on to the pavement to watch her walk away. Blessed be Her Loveliness, and might her son——! Mr. Slade made a little bow in the direction of that graceful figure. She would not observe this instinctive act of homage, but never mind. Now, if instead of Clara, he had? Mr. Slade felt someone tugging at his sleeve. He looked down to one side and saw a small girl, one of his favourites, Polly Harker, with a penny in her hand.

"Can I have some jujubes, Mr. Slade?"

"Why, of course, my dear."

Polly had her jujubes, and the penny was returned to her.

"Oo, thank you, Mr. Slade."

She held out the small paper bag to him which contained more than a mere pennyworth.

"Won't you have one, Mr. Slade?"

Mr. Slade had one, and was surprised sucking a sweet, by his next customer. He swallowed it hurriedly, for certain ladies might not think it polite of him if he had a jujube voice when serving them.

Mr. Slade had always held November to be a much maligned month, and more benign and consoling than April. Maybe, that by November you had shed all illusions, or harvested those that had set ripe seed. Yes, the fruits of the earth were gathered in, the corn in the granary, the apples in some cool cellar. April, with its raw urges, and its cry of "Sweet—what? I do not know what or why!" was somewhere in the past with the dead primroses and sleeping windflowers. This November was particularly serene, a golden month with morning mists furling themselves like grey blinds into the pale blue of the sky. The month was Mr. Slade's mood in its manifestations. The leaves were yellow above you and yellow about your feet. The incipient tang of winter gave you the right to light a fire and sit before it. No winds blew as yet, or made a moaning in the chimney.

Mr. Slade was to remember that November evening. He closed the shop at half-past five, put on an overcoat, slipped a box of crackers and some matches into his pockets, and set off down the High Street. How Mr. Truslove would have enjoyed this prospective bit of fun! The lights of Southfleet winked at him. Dr. Richmond's dogcart rolled past him with its two yellow eyes staring straight ahead. The old timber-yard was like a dark void in the spangled street, a melancholy place, like a great, empty, voiceless mouth, but Mr. Slade knew that other adventures were in progress there. New, brick frontages and plate-glass windows were to replace the green gloom of the fallen chestnut trees. "Under the village chestnut tree——!" No, the poetry did not apply. Mr. Gollightly's new windows would smile at you like some polite shopwalker.

"What can I do for you, madam?"

"Oh, just not be there," thought Mr. Slade.

Mr. Lovejohn, a junior gardener, was on special duty at the gate, and Mr. Lovejohn had a grievance. He was surly to Mr. Slade. Like most of those whom Burke had described as "The Swinish Multitude", he had to be bribed if any additional exertion was required of him. His response to any altruistic proposal would be, "What do I get out of it?" And here was John Lovejohn on a November night stuck at a gate because his betters had a party, and no one as yet had offered him beer or half-a-crown.

"Got a ticket?"

Mr. Slade had not.

"Then you can't come in. It's a private party. A lot of fools lettin' off fireworks. And—we—have to clear up the mess."

Mr. Slade remained benign. It was the ultimate resignation that wisdom forced upon you in your dealings with the lazy and unimaginative many.

"Oh, yes, I do come in, Lovejohn. I provided the—mess, and Mr. Richmond invited me."

Mr. Lovejohn's heavy hands remained upon the gate.

"Got anything to show?"

"Well, I shall have, you know. A letter of complaint to the Trustees on the discourtesy of a member of the staff."

"I'm doing my dooty."

"How English of you, Lovejohn, how very English," but the argument was settled by the arrival at the gate of Dr. Richmond. Dr. Richmond was a Trustee, and Mr. Lovejohn fawned upon him.

"Good evenin', sir."

"Hallo, is that you, Mr. Slade?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Come along in. You were the provider of the feast."

The gate was opened and Mr. Slade passed through with the doctor's hand upon his arm.

There was a golden glow down yonder among the oak trees. Charles and his satellites had collected the material for a bonfire

in that hollow place where children played, and to Mr. Slade the scene was pure fantasy. The autumnal oaks had become transformed into a goblin cave, or a great witch's cauldron spewing up flames and smoke, but the voices that came from it were those of children and not of hags. Dr. Richmond paused on the steep path, and Mr. Slade paused with him.

"Pretty, isn't it, sir."

Dr. Richmond nodded. He had left his top-hat at home, and was wearing a double-peaked shooting-cap.

"Strange business, Mr. Slade. Fanatics plot to blow up our sacred parliament, and we turn the devilry into a children's festival!"

"Well, doctor, what could be better?"

"The ultimate wisdom, what?"

"As in the Great Book, sir."

A rocket rushed heavenwards, and burst into green and red stars. Dr. Richmond watched it, and then walked on, but Mr. Slade remained on the path like the genius loci presiding over some mysterious ritual. That rocket had ushered in this children's festival. Squibs popped, crackers jumped about, Roman Candles shot up their coloured balls. The hollow under the oak trees became a fantastic place bubbling with childish voices. Little figures danced about, waving golden rain, or dodging the crackers that hopped and snapped about their legs. The flare of the fire lit up the playground and spread among the trees. The oak leaves glowed and Mr. Slade stood and smiled at the scene. He could distinguish the figures of Dr. Richmond and his son sharing in the orgy, and by the high seat where two oaks grew close together, Mrs. Richmond and her friends were gathered. Mr. Slade, remembering the crackers in his pocket, was moved to descend into that glowing, goblin ground, and play like a child with the children.

He had come to a turn in the spirals of the path where that particular seat stood in a recess. A ray of light from the fire pointed an almost accusing finger at it, but the two young

people on the seat were engulfed in each other. The embrace was mutual and complete. The girl was lying back in the man's arms, and he was bending over her so that her face was hidden. They were kissing, and the kiss seemed to go on for ever.

Mr. Slade stood very still. He knew—somehow—without asking himself the question, who this girl was who was being kissed. His daughter. James Slade felt shocked by the utterness of her surrender, and by the possessive and smothering passion of the male. There could be sacrilege in sex, as well as in beauty. Was it Charles Richmond? He would have been comforted a little if it had been Charles, but Mr. Slade looked down into the playground and saw Charles there, hurling squibs up into the oak trees where they hissed and exploded like fiery snakes. Oh, what a pity! What pain! What fear! But what could he do about it? Nothing. He felt like some shameful sneak spying upon these two.

Mr. Slade hurried on down the path, and glancing fearfully at the two interlocked figures, realized that he was neither seen nor heard. He was no more than a shrinking ghost drifting past that human scene. Young Hallard, of course! If by uttering some magic invocation, he could have put back the clock ten years, and made of her a child again?

Mr. Slade found himself in that fire-lit space, hiding himself behind the trunk of an oak tree. His right hand was still in his pocket, and clutching its packet of Chinese crackers. They were dead things, with no heart to skip and chatter, and Mr. Slade withdrew his hand. The child in him was dumb. His little white face was like some growth attached to the trunk of the tree. No one saw him. He did not want to be seen.

Fireworks and masked faces! Even the children had become small goblins. Charles Richmond, still throwing squibs, had put on a grotesque mask with a barbaric moustache. Dr. Richmond was pinning Catherine Wheels to a tree and setting them spinning. Little wheels of fire. Why had it all become sinister? The remnants of the Guy were still distinguishable

in the heart of the fire. James Slade shivered. Human sacrifice! Pagan rites! These huge, fantastic trees stretching out menacing hands. Yes, human sacrifice! And what was he but a poor, trembling, hysterical old fool!

2

The fire was dying down, the fireworks were finished. Dr. Richmond and his wife were shepherding the children up the steep path to the terrace above. One figure remained, that of Charlie Richmond.

His father had said, "Better stay and see the fire out, Charles. Here is the key of the gate if Lovejohn has locked up."

But Mr. Slade, still hiding behind his tree, had observed in Charlie Richmond a restlessness that had betrayed some thwarted expectation. This young man, even while throwing his squibs, had turned his face continually towards the place where the path flowed into the playground. Charles Richmond had been expecting somebody and she had not come, and now that he was alone under the trees, his figure expressed the frustration he was feeling. He walked round and round the fire. He kicked burning fragments of it back into the glowing heap. He stood and stared at it, his hands stuffed into his pockets. He was youth, angry and alone, angry with himself, angry with her.

Mr. Slade understood it all. But what was he to do? Venture out into the firelight and play father and friend, or remain in the outer darkness? Would youth in its anger and its jealousy welcome human interference? Mr. Slade was in a quandary. He saw himself locked up in the garden for the night if the surly Lovejohn had departed from the post of duty, and Charles Richmond were to let himself out alone with the paternal key. The gardens were surrounded by high, spiked railings, and Mr. Slade did not welcome the prospect of trying to climb them. He might suffer, not only in his heart, but also in his pants!

Mr. Slade was still hesitant behind his tree when he heard the voice. It seemed to come from above and the dark smother of

holly bushes. It was a young man's voice, and it shocked Mr. Slade into remembering the two lovers on the seat.

"Hullo, Richmond, you might lend—us—your key."

Mr. Slade saw Charles Richmond swing round, head up, as though someone had flung a stone at him.

"What key?"

"The key of the gate. That fool Lovejohn has gone off and left it locked."

"Well, the joke's against you, Hallard."

"Don't be a young ass. I want to take Rose home."

The insolent voice drawled out the provocation. Mr. Slade saw Charles pull his hands out of his pockets. He appeared to have forgotten that he was still wearing that ridiculous mask.

"You can whistle for it, Hallard. If Rose wants to go home, I'll do the letting out."

"Oh, will you!"

Hallard's voice was nearer now, and Mr. Slade could see him standing in the opening of the path.

"Pass over that key, my lad."

"Come and get it."

"Don't be a darned little fool. And I'd take that silly other-face off. It's not impressive."

Charles did not move, but waited—in silence—with his back to the dying fire. So, these two young stags confronted the mutual challenge, and Mr. Slade remained as the perplexed spectator behind his tree. Ought he to intervene? He did not want to intervene, provided that the lad he favoured would not take a licking. Mr. Slade was an excited and quivering mass of prejudice.

"Come on, hand over that key."

"Come and get it," said Charles.

Hector Hallard walked slowly and deliberately towards the figure by the fire.

"Nice sort of cheap cad, aren't you, Richmond?"

Charles was silent.

"Just beastly jealousy. No consideration for—the lady."

Charles said never a word.

"Are you going to hand over that key?"

They were within two yards of each other now. Charles put up a hand, pulled off the mask, tossed it into the fire, and then with a silent suddenness stepped in and hit. Hallard's hands went up, but not with sufficient quickness. The swinging blow caught him on the mouth, and floored him.

He was up like an uncoiling spring, and the fight was on. He was taller than Charles but not so stocky or so heavy. Moreover, Charles was boxing for his Hospital, and was hitting with savage exultation. Here was the fellow he had dreamed of smashing asking to be smashed. It was a whirlwind affair, neither lad trying to block blows or to cover up. They just slogged each other, and Mr. Slade grew so excited that he came out from behind his tree, and bobbed up and down like a shadow boxer. He wanted to shout, "Go it, Charles. Hit him. Good lad, that was a beauty! Go on, give him another like that. Yoiks—give him socks." But Mr. Slade did not indulge in such actual and vulgar shouting, though his own fists were up and delivering little shadow-dabs at the empty air.

Hallard was down again, but not finished with. Half rising he dived at Charles's legs and threw him. They were on the ground together in a wild tangle, rolling over and over, and dangerously near the fire. Mr. Slade had emerged from his cover of darkness. Was it not time for him to intervene? And who was uppermost? He was near enough to see that it was Charles, riding a pinned and squirming Hallard.

"Get off me, damn you. Can't you see I'm down?"

"Very much so," said Charles.

The Hallard conceit was squirming savagely, the rage of the great unlicked. The under-lad writhed and struggled, but Charles held him.

"No good, Hallard, better stay put. I'll let you up when I feel like it."

Mr. Slade was exulting, but his exultation was to be short-lived. That other figure came gliding out of the shadows, and the intervention was not to be James Slade's.

"You beast, let him get up."

"Hallo, Rose."

"You beastly bully, Charles."

Mr. Slade slid back again into the shadows. Well, well, well! You never knew how a woman would take a thing, salute the victor, or rescue the vanquished. Mr. Slade was shocked. His daughter's compassion was for the cad.

He saw Charles get on his feet.

"All right, Rose. You can take him home."

Hallard was up, dishevelled, and darkly furious.

"He hit me before my fists were up. Now then, Richmond, come on."

But Rose would have none of it. She pushed in between them, her hands on Hallard's chest, her face turned to Charles.

"Give me the key."

Charles looked at her, hesitated, and then felt in his pocket. He handed the key to Rose without a word.

"I'll leave it in the gate."

Charles nodded at her. Head up, she linked an arm in Hallard's, and drew him away towards the dark path.

3

Hallard had a bloody face, and yet she let him kiss her, for in kissing her his self-love shed some of its angry shame.

"Better let me wait for him here, Rose. I haven't finished with him yet."

"No, I won't have it. Let me look at your poor face."

"He hit me before I was ready."

"I know. Let me look."

A street-lamp stood near the gate, and by its light she looked at his face. There was a trickle of blood from one nostril, and the right eye was closing.

"He—has—hurt you. Give me your handkerchief."

"Don't bother, darling. I expect his face isn't exactly lovely."

"I hate him."

"Do you, Rose?"

"Yes."

He let her take his handkerchief and wipe some of the blood away. His vanity sucked up her compassion, and was assuaged by it.

"Ministering angel, what!"

"That which hurts you, darling, hurts me."

"Does it. I must kiss you again."

He kissed her, and then gently she pushed him through the gate. That wretch—Charles—might appear, and another scene be staged.

"Do go home, Hector. You must do something for that poor eye."

"Raw beefsteak is the orthodox remedy, I believe. Rather crude. I prefer cold water."

"Wait, I promised to leave the key for him."

"Wouldn't it be rather a joke to lock him in?"

"No, I promised."

Neither Mr. Slade nor Charles Richmond were worrying about keys. Charles was walking grimly round and round the fire, and Mr. Slade was watching him. Poor Charles! How the young took things to heart! Anger, and anguish, and frustration! Nor was Mr. Slade feeling exactly happy, or a dispassionate spectator of this tragi-comedy. What was it, after all, but just two lads coming to blows about a girl? No, it was so much more than that, especially so to Mr. Slade. Oh, the illusions of youth! If Charles had been the one to be licked, would Rose's role of compassionate intervener have been reversed? Possibly, possibly not. Damn it, how could you tell!

Well, what was he going to do about it? If he let Charles go, he—James Slade—would have to risk a scramble over those confounded railings. Mr. Slade leaned against his tree with

one arm round it, and his cheek pressed against the bark. Almost he seemed to be consulting the tree, and appealing to the stout oak to advise him. Maybe its tough silence gave him his inspiration. "Mum's the word, old man. Explanations can be the devil." So, Mr. Slade slunk backwards into the darkness and scuttled off like a familiar spirit. He knew all the paths in Caroline Gardens and, coming to one that joined the main path higher up, he turned down it, and arrived as the belated guest in the empty playground.

"Hallo, Mr. Charles, everything over?"

He saw young Richmond swing round and stand silhouetted against the fire.

"That you, Mr. Slade?"

"Yes. Afraid I have missed all the fun. Couldn't empty the shop in time. Everything go off well?"

"A. I."

"Splendid. No fizzles among the fireworks?"

"None."

Charles Richmond's voice was steady. He stood there, head up, with his hands in his pockets, and his back to the fire.

"I think the kids enjoyed it. The pater was here specializing in Catherine Wheels. And old Miss Megson got a cracker up her petticoats."

Charles laughed. It was not a very hearty laugh, but it was laughter, and Mr. Slade was glad. "Good lad," he thought, "that's the way to take it. No whimpering. God in Heaven, why must my girl be such a dear sweet fool?"

Mr. Slade was feeling in his pocket, and he rediscovered the packet of Chinese crackers.

"Bless me, if I haven't a packet of my own! No use taking them home, is it, Mr. Charles? I should like to let off a cracker."

"Jolly good idea," said Charles.

"Let's halve them. Got any matches left?"

"Yes."

"Come on—then."

So, in silence and with peculiar gravity Charles and Mr. Slade set those crackers alight and watched them skip and detonate about the playground. One of them, Mr. Slade's last effort, took a leap into the dying fire and expired there with a final and suggestive snap.

Mr. Slade seemed to be struck by this haphazard and whimsical finale.

"See that, Mr. Charles? It goes to show that you never quite know how a Chinese Cracker or a woman are going to jump."

Charles gave him a quick, searching look, but Mr. Slade was gazing intently at the fire.

"That's so, Mr. Slade."

"And neither a cracker nor a woman may jump the same way—twice. Which is—hopeful, and keeps one guessing. By the way, I hope you've got a key. Gentleman Lovejohn was in a rather peevish mood. I don't like climbing railings at my age."

Again, Charles Richmond laughed.

"There should be a key in the gate, Mr. Slade. Besides, you got in all right."

"So I did. Silly old ass."

"Besides, if the gate was locked, I'd shin over and find a key for you."

"Would you indeed," said Mr. Slade, "but dash it all—I've just remembered, I've got a key. And there are keys to other things besides gates."

XXIII

I

HAD Mr. Slade cast himself for the part of the amiable idiot or the simple old pantaloon, his daily disguise could not have been more practical. He was an old fellow with a

white head and a happy smile, who consorted with children and sold them toys, and was Southfleet's Father Christmas. Even that lovely person Mrs. Richmond might have suffered from the illusion that James Slade was one of those saintly creatures without guile, yet Mr. Slade was cultivating the wisdom of the serpent, who, if he so pleased, could conceal poison under his tongue.

For, a very particular purpose was taking root and growing in James Slade. Maybe he was a sentimentalist—maybe he was not. If there was one thing left to him that was worth while, it was the ultimate happiness of a particular person, and her happiness was in peril.

"Yes," thought Mr. Slade, "there are other forms of seduction than those recorded in romance. The whole of life may be a seduction, if the Serpent and Eve are left alone together. Am I being an old ass, and postulating the wicked Squire and the village maiden and the mercenary mother? I am not. Clara cannot help being Clara, but I can help her not to be Clara to our child."

Mr. Slade was sly. He seemed to know that by praising a certain person he might cull from the critical and candid mind the hostile comments and the information that he needed. So, he said to Eliza, "I understand that Miss Rose has a lover."

Eliza snorted.

"Well, if I were her mother, I'd have more sense."

"Young Mr. Hallard, isn't it?"

"It is."

"But, Eliza, I know there has been gossip, but he looks a very nice young gentleman."

Again Eliza snorted.

"Nice young gentleman, indeed! I wouldn't let a girl of mine be seen with him."

Mr. Slade expressed gentle surprise.

"Why not, Eliza?"

"Because he's a rotter, Mr. Slade, and a nasty rotter. You ought to remember what the girls said."

"I do remember something, Eliza. But young men will be young men, and Miss Rose may steady him down."

Eliza gave Mr. Slade a pitying look.

"Not likely. You're much too innocent, Dad. I don't like to think of a girl like Miss Rose getting into trouble—but——"

"You don't really mean that, Eliza?"

"Oh, don't I! You go and ask—— No, you couldn't do that, could you. But I happen to know."

Eliza folded her arms over some profound mystery.

"No, Mr. Slade, such things are not for the likes of you. Well, if you ask me—old Hallard will be forking out five bob a week for that young dude—or there'll be trouble. Yes, in six months, may be."

Mr. Slade played the simpleton.

"I don't quite know what that means, Eliza."

"No, you wouldn't. You're such a blessed innocent, Mr. Slade. But I'll say this, I've often felt minded to tell her mother."

"What, Eliza?"

"About his carryings on, and what's likely to come of it. But, bless you, I don't believe she'd blink an eyelid. Mrs. P. wants to be a lady. Have you heard she's got a carriage? Just because those there Hallards have got a name, she wouldn't smell stinking fish. Not she!"

Mr. Slade was perplexed and troubled, but not as to his ultimate purpose. Eliza's candour had put him in the pillory of not knowing how best to conduct his campaign. Blurring things out might only worsen the tangle. Of course he could go to Clara and say, "Unless you try to stop this business—I'll tell the truth." Rather a clumsy confession, that! For, could he tell the truth? Moreover, the ultimate problem was Rose herself, and her young infatuation for this most unpleasant young man. Was not love blind? Oh, damnably so! And was there not that saying that women fell for Don Juan and saw

nothing but stale bread in Honest John? Six weeks of silly rapture, and then—disillusionment and heartache, and cynicism. The filthy falseness of sex sliming everything. Disloyalty, deceit, shabby intrigues. No, by the Lord God, his rose should not be marred by that maggot!

2

Mr. Slade was dressing his shop and his windows for Christmas, and it was a lovely business, and he was loving it in spite of other preoccupations. He was less shy now of exhibiting himself in his windows while dressing them, for the faces which gathered there were friendly faces. Mr. Slade had his audience, little mobs of children who stared with innocent covetousness at the toys, and told each other which treasure they desired and, since some of them coveted the same toy, they would squabble about it.

Mr. Slade might shake his head at those who were too controversial and covetous, but the reproof was softened by a smile. Sometimes he would wink at the youngsters. But you had to be careful how you pulled grimaces. Some other person might suddenly appear and receive a merry flick of the eyelid that was intended for the children. So, one afternoon, Mr. Slade found himself winking at Miss Megson, who, greatly shocked and offended, tossed her bonnet at him and walked off head in air.

"Dear, dear," thought Mr. Slade, "I really must be more careful."

The Christmas Tree was a supreme effort. It stood in a green tub in the centre of the shop, and who should enter when he was climbing on the steps to decorate it but his daughter. Mr. Slade sat down suddenly on the top of the step-ladder, and spilled two of the glass balls from the box he was holding.

"Oh, Mr. Slade, what a pity!"

The coloured spheres lay smashed at the foot of the ladder.
Absit omen!

"Spilt milk, broken eggs, my dear! That comes of being too much in a hurry."

"But what a lovely tree!"

Mr. Slade looked down at the face of his daughter.

"And what a lovely lady!"

"Oh, Mr. Slade!"

Mr. Slade wagged a finger at her.

"Who told you to snatch the compliment, my dear?"

"But wasn't it?"

"It was. Now what can I do for the lovely Miss Pome-roy?"

Lovely she looked to him with her pretty colour and her dark and dancing eyes, with the little fur shako on her head, and other fur caressing her throat. That bright blue piece of cloth in the crown of the shako was just as it should be, and the thing itself was cocked at a charming angle. Mr. Slade's eyes loved her. Damn it, was he going to suffer this comely, glowing creature to be played with by some raw sensualist?

"Well, my dear, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing, really, Mr. Slade. I just——"

"You just came in?"

"Yes."

"Now—that's a real compliment. To the shop, I mean."

"It must be such fun."

"Believe me, it is. It keeps me as busy as a Jack in the Box. Sit down, my dear. I must not neglect my duties."

"Couldn't I help?"

"What, with the tree?"

"Yes."

Mr. Slade rubbed his chin.

"Well, perhaps, but in a particular capacity. You could hand me things while I tie them on."

Her face glowed.

"Yes, let me. You do use such wonderful words, Mr. Slade."

"Verbal gew-gaws, what! A pompous old pedant on a step-ladder."

She gave a lovely little giggle.

"There you go again. Where do we begin?"

Mr. Slade held out the box.

"Better take charge of these pretty-pretties before I break any more. You see, each has a little hook-thing. A loop of thread, and there you are."

"Where's the thread?"

"There's some on the counter. And a pair of scissors."

Rose took off her gloves and got to work, threading the glittering globes and handing them up to Mr. Slade. Mr. Slade had to keep moving the step-ladder round the tree, and every now and again customers would come into the shop. A Mrs. Cumberbatch was one of them, a rather sententious and very genteel lady with a face like a horse. Rose had mounted the step-ladder and was deputizing for her father.

Mrs. Cumberbatch, who talked at the back of her throat, eyed Miss Pomeroy with surprise and vague disdain.

"I see you have a new assistant, Mr. Slade."

Mr. Slade was only too conscious of the secret sneer.

"Handsome is as handsome does, madam. Let me see, what was it you wanted. A fur monkey? I'm afraid we haven't such a creature."

Mrs. Cumberbatch exhibited a superfluity of teeth.

"I did not say anything of the kind."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, madam, I'm afraid I get a little muddled sometimes."

"I said, a doll's tea-service."

"A doll's tea-service, madam. Certainly."

When the lady had departed, Rose looked down and through the tree at her father.

"Did you really think she asked for a fur monkey, Mr. Slade?"

"No, my dear, but she looked like it."

Rose gave another of her delightful giggles.

"You are naughty, Mr. Slade."

"Am I, my dear. Well, after all, this is a fun-shop."

"What do we hang up next?"

"Chinese Lanterns, I think."

But it was not Rose who was to decorate the tree with Chinese Lanterns. The shop-door opened and Mrs. Pomeroy was with them, a Mrs. Pomeroy who shot one dreadful look at James Slade and then became a creature of animated and condescending charm.

"Why, Rose, my dear, helping to decorate Mr. Slade's tree. How—nice and unaffected of you. But, my dear, I've just seen a lovely frock at Golightly's. The very thing for you to wear at our New Year's dance."

Mrs. Pomeroy was all honey and sweet graciousness.

"And how is the shop, Slade? All Noel, I see. Are toys selling well? Yes. How nice for you. Come, Rose, my dear. We must not miss that frock."

Rose gave her mother one dark-eyed and diagnostic stare, and descended from her perch. Did that frock exist or was it the sudden product of maternal imagination? Mr. Slade stood meekly by. When Clara became the sweet woman you might suspect the worst.

"Nothing I can show you, madam?"

"No, not to-day, Slade."

She gave him a brittle, blue-eyed smile. Mr. Slade knew that smile, and the arctic weather it portended. He opened the shop door for Mrs. Pomeroy, and mother and daughter passed out.

Mr. Slade closed the door, and stood rubbing his chin.

"Bribery, my dear Clara, sheer bribery. Now, will the child get that frock, or a furious wiggling? Coo, as the girls say—how you would have liked to spifficate me. But I rather think Rose will get that frock. It is your game to be gracious, Clara. The Duchess of Highfield—what? But, darn it, I've got the Ace of Hearts up my sleeve."

3

Rose had her frock. It was a lovely thing in white and cerise, the kind of dream-frock that a girl may covet for her first party. Mr. Golightly himself presided over the ritual, rubbing his hands, and stalking round and round and, in admiring his creation, flattering both mother and daughter.

"Charming! I do applaud your taste, madam. And—if I may say so, your daughter makes the frock look even—more—delightful. Yes, a Paris model, madam—Imported specially for me by my agents." Mr. Golightly might say what he pleased, for both mother and daughter were in a mood to be pleased. Even the tired little "Fitter", with a mouthful of pins with whom Rose had retreated into the holy of holies, agreed that no alterations were necessary. Miss Pomeroy carried the frock to perfection.

Mr. Golightly bowed them out to the carriage. He was no cynic about such a chariot. As a business man he could admire Mrs. Pomeroy and her social successes, while feeling that she had accomplished what was beyond him. Mr. Golightly might be Zeus among the tradesmen, but Mrs. Pomeroy was erecting her throne.

The carriage carried them to Highfield where the tea-tray was waiting before the fire. Mrs. Pomeroy stood unfastening her fur coat. She was looking jocund and gracious, and suddenly Rose kissed her mother. Somehow, since coming to Highfield, her mother had seemed different.

"You are a dear—to give me that frock."

Almost Mrs. Pomeroy looked coy.

"Am I, darling?"

"Yes."

"I think I know of—someone—who will be terribly taken by it."

"Who, mother?"

Mrs. Pomeroy pinched her daughter's cheek.

"You know—as well as I do."

Had James Slade been concealed behind one of the new velvet curtains or the red plush portière, he might have become less confident about his being in possession of the Ace of Hearts. Rose's feeling about her mother was actual. Mrs. Pomeroy looked handsomer, plumper, happier. In shedding the hotel and its eternal and trivial worries she seemed to have cast a habit of hard and brittle fussiness. She was more serene, and sat more solidly and comfortably in her chair, for life was blessing her beyond her expectations. Southfleet, the Southfleet that mattered, was accepting her; those precious pieces of pasteboard were preserved in a china dish on the drawing-room table. She liked to pick them up and gloat over them. Hereward Hallard, John Gage, Laurence Huskinson, Montague Emery, and their ladies. Mrs. Pomeroy did not trouble to reflect that a certain cynical inspiration might flavour these courtesies. The old woman had money, the old woman might give good dinners, she possessed a billiard-table, she even had looks.

There were hot buttered buns for tea. Highfield was all buttered bun to Rose. She might be romantic, but she had a healthy appetite.

"My dear——"

"Yes, mother."

"Don't think me a snob, but—I shouldn't—if I were you—exhibit yourself—in old Slade's shop."

Rose bit into her bun, and looked at her mother.

"Oh, it was just fun."

"I know, my dear. Just impulse. But there are kinds of fun that should be avoided just at present. You see, child, I am so jealous—for your happiness. I am sure you know what I mean."

Rose nodded, with her eyes on the hot dish. Should she have a second bun? She would. Yes, Highfield was a lovely place after the Caroline Hotel. It had a lawn tennis court and a billiard table and a carriage, a conservatory, and a capacious dining-room which could be converted into a ballroom. It

was a new world to Mrs. Pomeroy's daughter, and a very pleasant world, with new excitements and possibilities. Moreover, her mother was so much more mellow, almost a fellow conspirator in the pursuit of prestige.

"Yes, I think I understand, mother."

"Certain things, darling, may be quite harmless—but not—er—tactful. So much more is expected of us—now. I am very proud of my daughter."

Rose, having enjoyed her second bun, cast an eye upon a chocolate cake.

"I see. We have to think——"

"Of our new friends, my dear," and Mrs. Pomeroy gave her daughter an arch glance, "and of—someone—who may be more than a friend."

Rose gave a little flick of the head and blushed, not for her appetite, but in the cause of romance.

"Yes, I don't want to do anything—which—he might not like."

XXIV

I

MR. SLADE had a heavenly Christmas.

Eliza might have called it "A hell of a Christmas."

"Christians Awake" indeed! Eliza, stealing up the stairs on Christmas morning, heard Mr. Slade still snoring at nine o'clock. Well, let him snore, bless him, and for just as long as he pleased. She retreated, but the stairs were ungentlemanly; they complained of her weight.

"Drat you, why can't y' be sporty. Next, you'll be saying I have flat feet."

Mr. Slade slept on.

There had been a week of delirium. His success had sub-

merged him, enslaved him. He had been mobbed by mothers and aunts and children. Never had so much of Southfleet wanted so many toys. "How much is this, Mr. Slade?" "I'll take these two boxes." "No—I'm afraid that is not my parcel. It belongs to that lady." "I'm afraid you have given me too much change, Mr. Slade." He had become smothered up to the hilt. He had perspired. He had stuttered. But all the time he had smiled, and enjoyed it, and made a joke of his own bewilderment. Maybe some children of the baser sort had got out of the shop with toys that had not been paid for. His fingers had become quite sore and semi-paralytic with tying up parcels. He had fumbled and fussed and apologized. He had waded knee deep behind the counter in discarded boxes, or so it had seemed to him. Time had ceased; space had become non-existent. Faces, faces, faces; mouths making sounds at him. He had run out of change, and had had to send Eliza to the bank for it. Eliza had been dragged in to help in the tumult, but Eliza also had asked questions. For three days Mr. Slade's dinner had been gulped and masticated between dashes into the shop.

On the fourth day Mrs. Eliza had put her foot down, locked the shop door at one o'clock and pocketed the key.

"You sit down and have your dinner, Mr. Slade. Let 'em ring and fumble at the door."

What a week! What a gorgeous, perspiring, feet-aching week! Mr. Slade slept on. He woke at half-past nine, and looked at the clock beside the bed.

Half-past nine! Ye Gods and little fishes! He blundered out of bed, and called down the stairs.

"Eliza, my shaving water. Quick."

"What's the hurry?" said the voice. "You take it easy, Mr. Slade."

"But, Eliza, I have to be in church."

"What for?"

"I'm a sidesman, and I've got to go round with a plate."

Lor, Mr. Slade a sidesman! Well, why not? Why bloody well not? It was a rheumatically morning for Eliza, and she reverted to the forcefulness of her male relatives.

"I'll have your breakfast ready by ten."

"Oh, and Eliza, there's a present for you on the sitting-room table."

Eliza was both mollified and provoked, a strange emotional combination. She went in to collect her parcel, and undid it on the kitchen table. A pair of warm gloves, and two lace aprons! When a gentleman gave a lady a pair of gloves, didn't it mean——? But lawks, there were the aprons! She would always be an apron creature, and Mr. Slade was growing wings and fluttering higher and higher above aprons. Eliza sighed, and cut Mr. Slade two nice rashers of bacon.

That had been another of the week's sensations. Mr. Golightly had called after hours and been closeted with Mr. Slade in his sitting-room. Mr. Golightly was a churchwarden, and a most perfect and urbane specimen. He had announced to Mr. Slade that he and the Vicar and the Vicar's warden had agreed that Mr. Slade was the very person to take Mr. Carbutt's place as a sidesman. Mr. Carbutt had passed over. Mr. Slade had accepted the honour. Almost he had felt that he was being presented with a halo.

"Most kind of you, sir."

"Not at all, old man. You ought to do well with the plate. We gave up bags two years ago."

"Bags?"

"Yes, too tempting to the thrifty. A penny and a half-crown make the same noise in a bag."

Mr. Slade, full of hot coffee and a bacon and eggs, walked

briskly down the broad way between the tall hollies. His feet still ached a little, but his heart not at all so. Christmas morning, and the sun shining, and a silvering of frost lying on the grass. Red berries on the hollies. Other people wished him good morning and a happy Christmas. Mr. Slade was sporting a new pair of gloves. He was nearing the porch when the Highfield carriage followed upon his heels. Mr. Slade stepped aside for the gentry.

Mrs. Pomeroy and Rose! Mr. Slade raised his hat, but Clara did not appear to see him. His daughter gave him a curt smile and a formal little nod. Mr. Slade waited for these new carriage folk to enter the church before him, but Rose's Christmas salutation was not what he would have wished.

Mr. Slade was making for his familiar seat, when the verger waylaid him.

"Not there, Mr. Slade."

"Why not?"

"You take the south aisle. Where Mr. Carbutt sat."

Mr. Slade surrendered. Authority had told him to go up higher, and he could not enter into a controversy—even in whispers—on Christmas Day. Mr. Carbutt's seat was a corner one half-way up the south aisle. Mr. Slade slipped into it and was about to kneel when the verger pushed something at him, an oak plate lined with red velvet. Mr. Slade did not appear to know what to do with it. He deposited it under the seat with his hat. He prayed, he sat, he stood. He could glance across to the Pomeroy pew where the new gentry had joined the elect. Clara too had gone up higher. Mr. Slade contemplated his daughter's pretty head. Was it being turned? Oh, possibly! The Hallards were not present, but Charles Richmond stood beside his mother on the other side of the aisle. He may have glanced at Rose, but Rose's eyes were not for him.

"While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night."

The whole church sang. Mr. Slade sang, and while he sang

he prayed. "Oh, God, give my child wisdom. Teach her to love as she should love. Save her from that snobbery which chills the heart. Let unhappiness and disillusionment be far from her." But a sudden sadness fell upon James Slade. Some premonition of what was to happen seemed to steal upon his spirit. Love could be so clear-sighted and it could be so blind. And more perilous than either was when it looked at life through golden glasses.

"Hark The Herald Angels Sing."

Mr. Slade went round with his plate—to music. He had fertilized the offertory with a shilling. Then, he gathered with Messrs. Gage, Golightly and Beckwith under the gallery, and marched gravely up the central aisle to present the offerings to Mr. Chatterway. Mrs. Pomeroy, observing him in that procession, gave the back of him a rigid stare. She was not pleased. Now, what was the significance of James Slade's promotion among the elect?

Mr. Slade walked back down the aisle. He did not look at Clara or at his daughter, and neither of them looked at him.

2

Eliza gave Mr. Slade roast beef etc. and plum pudding with custard for his Christmas dinner. Mr. Slade sat down to it alone, and in being alone he was conscious of depression. How many millions of people were eating roast beef or turkey and Christmas pudding at this same hour, and not eating it in solitude. He supposed that at Highfield Clara and Rose were honouring the same gastronomic ritual, or did Highfield dine at half-past seven? Clara appeared to be attaining her ambition, and Mr. Slade, trying to eat his meal with relish and without insult to Eliza, found himself realizing that Highfield House was very far removed from the Caroline Hotel. Clara had driven to church behind a pair of greys; Clara had not managed to see him; his daughter's smile had been shallow and perfunctory.

Well, well, well! Was it not obvious that he would be nothing but an obscure little shopkeeper so far as Clara and Rose were concerned, and that both he and Clara were locked up in the same fateful silence. Clara was clever, much too clever. Oh, damn Clara. Why had she imposed this almost fantastic penance upon him? Just implacable vindictiveness? Did she regret it? Probably. But she was counting upon both the shameful past and the sentimental future to close his mouth.

"You cannot destroy your daughter's happiness."

No, of course not, but was Rose going to be happy?

Mr. Slade ate his pudding and felt it lying heavy on his stomach. He was tired. Eliza had put oranges and nuts on the sideboard. No, nuts would make indigestion inevitable.

He rang the bell, and Eliza came to clear away.

"Enjoyed your dinner, Mr. Slade?"

Mr. Slade rose against his melancholy. Good service demanded its salute.

"It was a lovely dinner, Eliza. What a cook you are! Now you go and enjoy yours."

Mrs. Eliza sat down to a solitary meal. What a pity that two elderly people could not have enjoyed it together!

Mr. Slade put his feet up, and fell asleep, but uneasily so, for other and mysterious meat lay heavy on the stomach of his soul.

Down in the kitchen Eliza ate solemnly and in solitude. She glanced up at the gas-bracket. She had hung a piece of mistletoe there.

"Silly old fool," said Eliza to Eliza.

3

Clara Pomeroy had considered her attitude to the past, the present and the future, and it must be confessed that for so solid and formidable a woman her posing was not unsubtle. She had to placate people who insisted upon prestige, and if she

had to bribe them into accepting her, the thing had to be done with some grace and humour.

She chose to assume certain social privileges, while shrugging her fine shoulders, and giving her audience a confidential smile.

She had her carriage.

She had her crest and its motto painted upon the doors.

"Aut vincere aut mori."

Her coachman carried a cockade.

Yes, she was a Pomeroy, and could claim her descent from that West Country family.

She could rally herself and her friends on the joke of the Caroline Hotel. Life was droll, was it not? A Pomeroy recovering her social status—financially—by running an hotel! To conquer or die! She had conquered and she was not dead, but once more a Pomeroy, a notable woman who had nailed her colours to the mast, and now could display them more comfortably from the admiral's flagstaff in the Highfield grounds. Even the Pomeroy garden had become "Grounds".

Hereward Hallard Esq., that lean and disillusioned old cynic, was persuaded to chuckle with her over her flouting of fate. Old Hereward, having been married for some forty years to a pale and vapourish wife, liked his women bold, buxom, and well-coloured. He found himself flirting with Mrs. Pomeroy, for Clara had blossomed into a new jocundity since the transplantation to Highfield. Hereward Hallard remembered the chorus-girl days of his youth, and Mrs. Pomeroy's handsome, high-bosomed vitality was blonde to his fancy. Moreover, Mrs. Pomeroy could take a joke, and listen to a naughty story and make eyes, while pretending to be shocked.

"Oh, you naughty man!"

She would pretend to suppress succulent laughter. Yes, Mrs. Pomeroy was fun, and not like poor Edith who whimpered and waggled through life, and was so refined that she was shocked into migraine if her husband said "Damn".

Moreover, old Hallard approved of the daughter. Rose was a pretty thing, the best looker in Southfleet, and if young Hector wanted her, why not? The Hallard finances were lean, and the Pomeroy woman had money. Mr. Hereward decided to take her at her own estimate, and to emphasize the cockade and the crest.

"A damned plucky woman, sir. Not ashamed to get down to hard tacks and bring the business off."

Clara's invitations had gone out for a house-warming, a dance early in the new year. The invitation to the Hallards set poor Edith rustling and shaking like an aspen. To her Mrs. Pomeroy was a vulgar person. All vigour was vulgar to poor Edith. As for dear Hector's infatuation it seemed to her quite deplorable. Just a pretty face. No, she could not countenance a Pomeroy party.

Her husband was contemptuous and determined.

"Don't be silly, woman."

"I am not being silly, Hereward."

"Then what are you being?"

"I'm—being—a gentlewoman and a mother."

"The quintessence of refinement, what! I suppose you would like the lad to marry that strumous little Lakin wench, or the Gridley girl—with a face like a pig."

"Don't be so vulgar, Hereward!"

"Bosh, my dear, it is just a matter of common sense. Whenever Hector has looked at a girl you have always started a headache."

"You are unkind, Hereward."

"Dash it, try your smelling salts."

"Oh, dear, I do feel so——"

"You can go on feeling so, Edith, but you will accept that invitation."

Mrs. Hallard accepted it, but she did not go to Highfield House. Instead, she went to bed with a headache and a bottle of bromide.

The Richmonds were contending with a sudden strange shyness in their son. Shy of work he was not, but shy of social affairs he was. Mrs. Pomeroy's party was to be a young party, with certain notable exceptions, and an invitation had gone to Mr. Charles Richmond. Rose had marked Charles's name on her mother's list of invitations and had questioned it.

"Must we ask young Richmond?"

"Of course, my dear. We are rather short of young men."

"He's such an oaf."

"Charles may be a little gauche, but he does admire you, I think! Besides, my dear, competition is provocative."

"Oh, well, just as you like, but I won't dance with him."

Charles Richmond, on his part, was unwilling to accept the invitation. He did not dance, and he would not dance, and he abominated parties. His mother and his father exchanged understanding glances. If their son was being difficult, there might be secret frustrations to account for it.

Dr. Richmond was about to say that Charles must get over such prejudices, and that the social graces were good for the practice, but something in his wife's eyes prevented him from saying it. There were certain forms of sensitiveness that should not be coerced.

"All right, Charles; do as you please."

His mother smiled at them both. She knew very well why her son was shy of Highfield.

Southfleet, the Southfleet that was supposed to matter, heard all about Mrs. Pomeroy's party. There was to be a sit-down supper, with champagne, and the catering was assigned to Messrs. Barron and Son. Mr. Stack, who was both a furniture-remover and an undertaker, was engaged to prepare the hall and the drawing-room for the dance. Mr. Stack had buried the Admiral, but this was to be a gayer occasion. The band was to come from London. Quite a number of young

ladies were taken to Mr. Golightly by their mothers to be decorated for this happy occasion.

Eliza, who was a great gatherer of Southfleet gossip, passed on all the news to Mr. Slade.

"Setting a mouse-trap, I call it."

"Why mouse-trap, Eliza?"

"Why! All the town knows she's after young Hallard. Well, if I had a daughter I wouldn't work her off on that nasty young toff."

Mr. Slade felt sad about it. Eliza might be right, and orange blossoms be persuaded to bloom in a bath of champagne.

The New Year brought snow, four inches of it, and Southfleet pier looked like a great white caterpillar crawling out to sea on black legs. Doorsteps and pavements had to be swept, and Mr. Slade was sweeping his when Charles Richmond happened by.

"Good morning, Mr. Slade."

"Good morning, sir. Home for the holidays?"

"Just a week or two. Do you stock skates, Mr. Slade?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't, sir. I think you could get them at Gosset's."

A mighty broom other than Mr. Slade's had swept the sky. Frost at night, and star glitter, and the moon rising upon a white world. It was cold in the shop, and Mr. Slade bought himself an oil stove and a pair of mittens. Eliza gave him a stone hot-water bottle wrapped in flannel in his bed at night. A hot bottle might be more significant than mistletoe. Trade rested after the rush of Christmas, and Mr. Slade, checking stock and his accounts, found that he had made a profit of thirty-three pounds, one shilling and ninepence during the Christmas week.

He sat up for three nights straightening out his accounts, and writing out new orders to replace the goods he had sold, but the fourth night was the night of the Highfield party, and a sudden restlessness descended upon James Slade. He put on

his heavy boots, an overcoat and a muffler and, leaving Eliza sitting by the kitchen fire, went out to stretch his legs and his curiosity. He walked down the High Street and along Caroline Terrace to the Cliff Road. The moon seemed to lure him westward. It was shining above the trees and the tourelles of Highfield House.

Carriages and cabs passed Mr. Slade, with their yellow eyes set towards Highfield. He could suppose that this was a very great occasion for Clara, a festival inaugurating the new regime, while he was a little, obscure outsider, remote even from his own child. He would like to have seen Rose in her party frock. Three or four carriages were waiting their turn to unload their young merchandise at the porch, and the gardener was on duty at the gate to regulate their coming and their going. Mrs. Pomeroy's coachman opened carriage doors. The snow had been spaded away from the path into a white bank two feet deep.

Mr. Slade stood beside the gate. The gardener carried a lantern and shone its light upon the entrance to help the drivers. Mr. Slade had a glimpse of dim young faces behind carriage windows. It occurred to him to wonder whether Mr. Charles Richmond was to be one of the guests.

Mr. Slade loitered there until the last of the carriages had come and gone. A faint sound of music, a Strauss waltz drifted out to him. Yes, he could remember dancing that waltz with Clara. How distant were those days! What a sensation he could cause now were he to glide into the house like a ghost, and appearing in the crowded room, claim his wife and daughter! And how unwelcome he might be to both!

Mr. Slade, feeling rather like a ghost, was about to fade away when he realized that he was not alone. A figure had arrived at the gate on foot. It stood there hesitant, looking in. Mr. Slade was partly concealed by one of the brick gate pillars and the overhang of a snow-laden laurel. Moreover, the moon was shining in the young man's eyes.

Charles Richmond!

Mr. Slade held his breath. This young man's anguish of indecision was that of the eternal lover afraid of the thing he loved. Yes, and more than that. Maybe Charles feared to see that other lad in possession of the creature he desired. Well, why not dare it, and put your jealousy in blinkers? Mr. Slade stood pressing close to the pillar, willing that hesitant figure to go forward, pangs or no pangs. He saw Charles Richmond walk in and disappear, and Mr. Slade gave thanks.

"Good lad, go to it. Faint heart never——"

But it was not to be. Charles Richmond reappeared, his back to the moonlight and romance. Almost blindly he walked straight into the piled up bank of snow, and pitched forward over it.

"Damn!" was his one exclamation.

Mr. Slade sadly echoed that damn.

XXV

I

AT three o'clock in the morning Mrs. Pomeroy was sitting by her bedroom fire, tired yet complacent, for the party had been all that she hoped that it would be. She was brushing her fine hair, and wondering just what had happened that evening, for a radiant Rose had provoked her mother's hopes. She had had the young men about her and particularly the one whom Mrs. Pomeroy coveted as a son-in-law. Rose had danced five times with Hector Hallard. She had sat out with him after supper in the conservatory. Mrs. Pomeroy had been careful to keep the romance under interested observation.

When the show was over a flushed and excited Rose had kissed her mother.

"Enjoyed yourself, darling?"

"Oh, yes, ever so much," and Rose had fled.

Now, what had been the significance of her daughter's impetuous confusion and sudden flight? Was Rose hiding her ecstatic secret and exulting over it in secret, just because it was hers? Mrs. Pomeroy could understand the holding of some precious piece of jewellery in the hollow of the hand, while you gloated over it, and closed jealous fingers over it, as though the thing was too precious for the moment to be revealed to other eyes.

Came a knock at Mrs. Pomeroy's door.

"Are you awake, mother?"

"Yes, my dear, come in."

Rose was very much undressed, and so were her emotions. What pretty legs the child had, and what luscious hair! Mrs. Pomeroy's hairbrush remained poised; she might have been Juno in a tableau vivant.

"What is it, dear?"

Rose rushed at her mother, knelt, clasped her, and turned up that flushed face to be kissed.

"I didn't want to tell anybody to-night. It was so wonderful. And then—I——"

Mrs. Pomeroy patted her daughter's head very gently with the back of her brush.

"Something happened, Rose?"

"Yes, he asked me to marry him."

"Who, dear?"

"Hector."

Mrs. Pomeroy was savouring and enjoying the confession. Surely, it behoved a world-wise mother not to be too knowledgeable.

"My dear, Hector!"

"Yes. Oh, I'm so happy. I couldn't go to bed—after all—without telling you"

"My darling, I'm so glad."

Mrs. Pomeroy embraced and kissed her daughter.

"Isn't it—wonderful, mother! Of course we shan't be married for a long time. Hector has to take his degree."

Mrs. Pomeroy was quite playful.

"So I shan't lose my darling poppet all at once. I suppose dear Hector——"

"He thinks he may go on the Stock Exchange. He's so clever about money. Of course, as he says, it is not quite what a gentleman might wish for, but you see poor old Mr. Hallard had lost a lot of money owing to the depression in farming."

"The Stock Exchange can be quite—gentlemanly, dear, and so—lucrative when a young man has influence and brains."

"So, Hector says. Sir Bertie Hallard is an uncle of his, and quite distinguished in the City."

"He was Lord Mayor, I think, a few years ago."

"Yes."

"Hector himself would have preferred the Diplomatic Service, but as he says—beggars aren't choosers. He's so good about it, mother."

"I'm sure he is, darling. And does Mr. Hereward know?"

"Hector was going to tell him at once. And he wants to come and see you to-morrow."

"Quite right and proper, darling! I shall be delighted."

Mrs. Pomeroy slept excellently upon such news, Rose less so, and both of them breakfasted in bed.

The winter sun rose upon snow and this virginal romance, and upon a very complacent Clara, for Mrs. Pomeroy had drunk but one glass of her own champagne, though the wine seemed to have done the trick with Hector. If her daughter was silly with sex, Mrs. Pomeroy was shrewdly silly in her social escapades. Would these two gentlemen honour their bond on the morning after? Had Clara seen Mrs. Hallard in bed, weeping and whimpering while her husband shaved himself and administered to her drafts of dry sarcasm, Mrs. Pomeroy

would have realized that the Hallard men were out to do business with her.

Both gentlemen called at Highfield House, and together, but the interviews were separate and in sequence. Clara received Hector in the library, while old Hereward was flirtatiously paternal with Rose in the drawing-room. Hector's attitude to his future mother-in-law was sleepily impudent and whimsical, but politely intimate. He kissed Mrs. Pomeroy. He declared himself to be a lucky devil, though, of course, the infinite favour was being conferred upon Rose.

Then, they changed partners. Rose was taken into Hector's lap on the drawing-room sofa, and Mr. Hereward stood warming his coat-tails at the library fire.

"Well, madam, I think we can congratulate each other on this happy event."

"I am so glad you think so, Mr. Hallard. Rose is a sweet child. I don't think I have ever known her out of temper."

"Inherited—from her mother, no doubt," said Mr. Hallard gallantly.

Mrs. Pomeroy gave him a loving look.

"No, I cannot pretend to be as sweet tempered as Rose. Shall we be frank, sir? When will Hector——?"

Mr. Hallard sucked in his lower lip, a peculiar trick of his.

"My dear lady, I agree. We Hallards have always been a little—gay—in—our young days. That is why I am glad of this—engagement. It will help Hector to settle down."

"Yes, lads will be lads," said Mrs. Pomeroy, "but——" She waited, with an upward glance at Mr. Hereward. Her blue eyes held him to the point at issue.

"Ah, yes——" and Mr. Hallard waggled his coat-tails. "Hector has to finish at the 'Varsity; it is probable that he will get his blue. An athletic reputation counts, dear lady, in the City. Then, I hope to place him with my cousin, Sir Bertie Hallard. An excellent firm. A junior partnership—would of course help and expedite matters."

Mr. Hereward looked at the toes of his shoes, as though some vulgar consideration embarrassed him.

"It may be a question of cash."

Mrs. Pomeroy's smile was steel-bright.

"Purchase money?"

"Exactly. I don't suppose the firm would take him under two thousand."

"A lot of money, Mr. Hallard."

"Yes, but the prestige—and the immediate career. I am a soft-hearted old codger, Clara."

Mrs. Pomeroy accepted the "Clara", as she might have accepted a bouquet.

"I—might—assist——"

Mr. Hallard's lean face expressed genial surprise.

"You? Oh, I was not suggesting—— But very generous of you. I might put up—a thousand."

Mrs. Pomeroy sat considering.

"Let me see—in two years' time?"

"Yes, about that. I'll get into touch with Sir Bertie."

"I gather that Hector—if he became even a junior partner—could count on an income sufficient to enable him——?"

"Oh, quite so."

"Then I think I might add a thousand to your thousand. I shall, of course, allow my daughter a certain sum yearly."

Mr. Hallard bowed to her.

"Dear lady, you are very generous. My homage to you."

2

The engagement was announced immediately, and Southfleet had a good deal to say on the subject, and much of the gossip would not have been pleasing to the ears of Mrs. Pomeroy. The most snobbish motives were assigned to her, and the most mercenary ones to the Hallards. People like the Richmonds were seriously and sincerely shocked, and not because their son had failed to find favour with Miss Pomeroy. Did not

the woman know what sort of reputation young Hallard had in Southfleet? The family tradition—so far as women were concerned—was absolutely Georgian.

Charles, a rather grim young man, returned to Guys and the dissecting-room earlier than was necessary. He was in a savage mood, and almost disposed to discover dead illusions among corpses. Damn all women! Work was the thing! He sat up late in his digs, reading for his next exam., until his intimate chipped him about his red eyelids.

"Been crossed in love, Charlie?"

"Shut up," said Charles fiercely, and the particular wag discreetly did so.

Strangely enough Mr. Slade did not hear the news until he read it in the society gossip of the *Southfleet Argus*. "We have much pleasure in announcing the engagement of Miss Pomeroy, the only daughter of Mrs. Pomeroy of Highfield House, to Mr. Hector Hallard, the son of our most respected—etc." Mr. Slade was at breakfast. The news upset him. He threw the paper across the table, and with such petulance that he upset his tea-cup and made a horrid mess on Eliza's clean cloth. Mr. Slade grabbed the cup and returned it to its saucer. He sat and stared at the stained cloth. Something ought to be done about it. Something ought to be done about this other business.

He got up and rang the bell for Eliza.

"Oh, Eliza, I've spilt my tea."

Eliza came heavily upstairs.

"Lawks, Mr. Slade, however did you do that? I'll put it under the hot tap at once."

Mr. Slade looked pathetic.

"I'm afraid I'm rather upset, Eliza."

"What about, Dad?"

"Oh, just something in the paper."

"Not about you—surely?"

"No, not about me. About Miss Rose."

Eliza was playing a deft game of chess with the breakfast things, moving them to one side of the table, rolling up the cloth, and moving them back again. For once Eliza had missed a piece of gossip.

"She's not marrying her to that——"

"I'm afraid she is, Eliza."

"Disgraceful, I call it! 'uman sacrifice. Why, if I were——"

"Yes, Eliza, I know. I'm afraid part of the trouble is that Miss Rose is in love with young Hallard."

"Poor innocent! It beats me—girls being such fools about a lardy-da gent like that."

"He has—looks, you know, Eliza."

"Looks! My word—if only she knew that he'd been with——"

Mr. Slade looked pleadingly at Eliza. Need the good soul—even in her innocence—rub it in so thoroughly?

"Yes, Eliza, I know. But there it is. Perhaps she'll change him."

"A lewd snake is always a snake, Mr. Slade. If he sheds his skin it'll only be to show off a nice new one to the next girl. He's a bad lot, Dad. He'll make her miserable, that's what he'll do."

Eliza had completed the rescuing of the stained cloth, and Mr. Slade sat contemplating the marmalade pot. He had been at the marmalade stage when the thing had happened.

"I wish something could be done about it, Eliza."

But Eliza's immediate concern was with the stained cloth. She marched off with it, and Mr. Slade decided that he did not want any marmalade.

3

Was interference possible? Was it justifiable? Had any man the right to meddle with the emotional problems of his neighbour? Yes, but his own daughter? Mr. Slade lit a pipe and wandered down into the shop; he could smoke when

he pleased now, and not like some surreptitious urchin enjoying a stolen fag. He walked up and down between the counters. Love! Oh, Lord! What a messy business it could be! As for trying to give advice at such a time, it was like putting your finger into a jam-pot that was full of wasps.

He perched himself on the counter of the petticoat side of the shop, and smoked and stared, and swung his feet without any consideration for the new paint. He saw without seeing boxes of lead soldiers and toy trains, Noah's Arks and tin trumpets, toy guns and cricket-sets. Mr. Slade got off the counter and walked up and down again. He tried the other counter. Dolls. His glance fell upon a particular doll, a male creature in a sailor suit. Mr. Slade disliked that doll. It somehow suggested young Hallard, with its staring, sleepy, insolent eyes. Damned little mannikin squatting complacently amid the girls! Mr. Slade was conscious of sudden poignant exasperation. He got off the counter, passed behind the other one, yanked Doll Hector down from his shelf, and holding him by the legs, banged his head upon the counter. Doll Hector's head was of china, and it broke. One blue-bead eye remained upon the counter. Mr. Slade swept it off, and feeling foolish and guilty, returned the corpse to the shelf, a headless thing. There would be no more ogling by that damned doll.

But, seriously, what was to be done about it? Could anything be done about it? After all, Hector Hallard might be a little wild, and the victim of gossip, and no doubt the Deity himself might prefer your gallant to your prig. The lad could not be rotten physically if he was in the running for the Cambridge "Eight", and as for his morals— Well, what was morality? Had not he—James Slade—spent seven years in—? Kindness was a virtue that counted, a compassionate magnanimity which shrank from hurting the thing it loved. And Rose loved this young man. Had she no right to say, "This love is mine. Leave me to care for my own garden. I take love in my own hands—for better or for worse?"

Mr. Slade was perplexed and troubled. There seemed to be no one to whom he could appeal for counsel. Had John Truslove been alive! But was not the spirit of John Truslove still living? You could ask the dead questions, and they might answer you, through the living memory that remained with you like a familiar and friendly spirit.

Mr. Slade did an extraordinary thing. He put on an overcoat, boots and hat, and leaving the shop locked up, walked down to the churchyard of St. John's, and stood bare-headed by his dead friend's grave.

"John, what am I to do?"

Mr. Slade stood holding his hat, head bowed, listening for some inward voice that might speak to him as the live voice of John Truslove might have spoken.

Nothing came, and then James Slade asked another question. "Am I an old fool, John, listening to tittle-tattle? Is there any man or woman in this town who can paint for me a fair and dispassionate picture? Someone may know. I need a friend, John, to whom I can confess, someone who will keep my secret, and give me counsel."

The question was answered. Mr. Slade's eyes were fixed upon John Truslove's head-stone, and suddenly he seemed to see upon it a name—"Richmond." It was there and it was not there, but it was the name James Slade needed. Dr. Richmond! Had not the beloved physician a reputation for healing hearts as well as bodies? People took their problems to him as well as their ailments, and to many a man and many a woman Dr. Richmond had played the father-confessor.

Mr. Slade put on his hat. Then, he took it off again, and saluted his friend.

"Thank you, John. That is the man for me. I'll do it."

A doctor may have many strange stories told to him, but Dr. Richmond had never listened to a story more strange than

that which Mr. Slade related. The doctor sat on one side of his desk, Mr. Slade on the other, nursing his hat with his hands folded over it.

"I have not come as a patient, sir. I have come to make a confession to you, and to ask your advice. Are you willing to hear me?"

Dr. Richmond was observing this white-headed old child.

"Yes. I will listen. But what advice can I promise?"

"That remains to be seen, sir. I have come to you because I feel that I can trust you. You will keep my secret."

"I will."

"No one but John Truslove knew—the truth, and he, sir, could keep a secret. May I begin?"

Dr. Richmond bent his head to Mr. Slade.

It may have occurred to Dr. Richmond that this father-confessor business was the supremest form of flattery, if he wished to value his work in the terms of crude success. He did not so wish to value it. No man is without some vanity, but the husband of Lucy Richmond had watched a compassionate sense of humour mellow in himself so that he could smile at and over the tricks of his own more human ego. Moreover, here was this simple and good old soul stripping himself of his social disguise and exhibiting to the physician a pathological past. Dr. Richmond was not likely to forget that he too had escaped—by the grace of God and the magnanimity of a woman—from the near disaster of a past. Did that matter? It did and it did not. Your conscience might be more merciful than the tongues of the many, but also it could be more ruthless.

The tale was told, and Dr. Richmond and Mr. Slade sat gravely regarding each other.

"So, you see, sir, my tongue is tied for ever and ever. And now you may be wondering why I am worried."

"It is—about your daughter?"

"It is, sir. I am not happy about this marriage that is to be.

There is only one person to whom I can make an appeal, and then—only in secret. That is my problem. I have a weapon that I can never use.”

Dr. Richmond nodded.

“What is it that you want of me?”

“To answer one question, if you will.”

“I will try to answer it, Mr. Slade.”

“It shall never go further. I hope you realize that?”

“I do.”

Mr. Slade hesitated for a moment.

“I will put it this way, sir. If you had a daughter, would you be happy in seeing her joined to that young man?”

Dr. Richmond’s eyes were steady.

“No, Mr. Slade, I should not be happy.”

XXVI

I

MR. Slade procrastinated. Some problems have a happy way of providing their own solution, but certain incidents provoked in Rose’s father a new sense of urgency. Eliza had a tale to tell, and Mr. Slade was shocked by it, but yet another incident stirred in him a feeling of protest.

A thaw had come and the world was slush and, though Mr. Slade had swept his piece of pavement, a dirty mess of melting snow lay in the gutter. Mr. Slade had his stove alight, and his mittens on when the Highfield carriage pulled up outside the shop. Mr. Slade happened to be standing at the shop door, and he saw the two ladies wearing furs, and nicely wrapped up under a rug of the same quality.

The coachman turned in his seat to take an order. He appeared to have something to say about getting down from his box and leaving his horses and, seeing Mr. Slade behind that panel of glass, he made a beckoning gesture with a large, white-gloved hand.

"Hi, you're wanted."

Mr. Slade may not have suffered from too quick a sense of personal dignity, but he was provoked by the new and exaggerated arrogance of Highfield. So Clara could not get out of her carriage to speak to him, but expected the shopman to come and stand in the slush while she gave some order. Mr. Slade remained recalcitrant behind his door.

The coachman cracked his whip and pointed to the ladies but Mr. Slade did not respond to whip crackings. Then, he saw the fur rug turned aside. His daughter emerged and crossed the pavement towards him and, in that moment of time, James Slade seemed to see in her a different creature, a more sophisticated and stylish young woman whose face had ceased to be flowerlike.

But Mr. Slade did open the door for her, and waited gravely for her message.

"Oh, Slade, my mother wishes to speak to you."

Slade, indeed! Even her voice was other than it had been, or so it seemed to her father. It had gathered affectation, an almost nasal quality. Oh, these social insincerities!

His answer had gentleness.

"Is your mother—unwell?"

"No."

"Then, I think she might leave her carriage, and enter my shop."

Incredible reaction, but his daughter's face betrayed pique, her voice hauteur.

"Oh, of course, Mr. Slade, if—you wish to stand upon—dignity."

Mr. Slade smiled at her.

"No, not upon dignity, but not in that slush."

She gave him no answering smile, and the change in her astonished him. He had known her as an impulsive, laughing creature, and she had become—just what?

"Oh, very well, Mr. Slade. I will tell my mother that you——"

"That I dislike slush, my dear. Just that."

His "my dear" seemed to put her head in air. Familiar old fellow! She turned and walked back to the carriage, and her very walk was other than it had been. It seemed to say—"The beautiful Miss Pomeroy of Highfield House crosses the pavement to her carriage." Mr. Slade closed the door of his shop. He saw Rose speak to her mother and Clara's sharp turn of the head. Rose was told to re-enter the carriage. They drove away.

James Slade was shocked, yet he could say to himself, "Am I being a hypersensitive old fool, and imagining things which are not there, or has this child become a supercilious little snob?" The Rose who had spoken to him as to an inferior person was the veritable child of her mother. The transfiguration did not seem credible. Why, only a few weeks ago, this girl had been helping him to dress his Christmas Tree, and had called it fun, and had giggled over it. Had Highfield and Hallard got into his daughter's blood? Yes, it was possible, but how quickly she had been infected. The social disease! It might attack you at all ages, but especially so in your plastic youth when the self is sappy and susceptible. Rose had the measles, an attack of genteel affectation, but scarlet-fever and measles could have their complications and their after-effects.

Mr. Slade felt like shrugging his shoulders. Here was the one creature in the world whom he had loved in secret and plotted to preserve from the illusions of a passionate credulity, proving to him that she was not worth his interference. Oh, no, he would not admit that. This was but a phase, a Hallard interlude. The girl was a little head in air, Highfield air. Did

he really believe that Clara and a young supercilious cad could debauch her? Debauch. What a beastly word! And yet it stuck in Mr. Slade's mind.

2

Once again Mr. Slade was moved to consult the spirit of his dead friend, and in doing so he was to be granted a sign and a symbol. A February night might not have appeared propitious for such a pilgrimage, but St. Valentine's day was near, and the dim headstones and crosses guided James Slade to John Truslove's grave.

"What ought I to do, John?"

He seemed to hear the shrewd and humorous voice of his friend saying, "Go to it, James. Be not faint-hearted."

Mr. Slade replaced his hat, and groped his way back to the main gate. The great holly hedges were very black on either side of the broad path that led from the Pier Hill to the church. Mr. Slade closed the gate very softly, and as he did so he heard a particular sound, a girl's protesting giggle, and then the sound of a kiss.

Lovers! Well, this quiet path protected by its great hedges was a promising place for secret meetings. Mr. Slade stood quite still for a moment. He did not wish to be a spoil-sport.

Said a girl's voice in an amorous whisper, "You can kiss, can't you, Mr. Hector. No, you mustn't do that."

"Why not?"

"It isn't—proper."

"Proper be—— I can't help being mad about a lovely thing like you."

There was the sound of a little scuffle, and then the girl's voice said, "I ought to be getting home—now. Be good, sir. I must go—reely."

James Slade had recognized the young man's voice, but not the girl's. "You *can* kiss, can't you, Mr. Hector." Damned young cad! For Mr. Slade belonged to a generation that had

refused to recognize man's promiscuity, and could hurl the word "Villain" in the best Adelphi manner. He stood leaning against the gate, listening to the sudden quick footsteps of the girl, as she broke and ran from her too impetuous lover. Who was she? Well, did it matter? Almost, Mr. Slade had a feeling that God and John Truslove had guided him to this place in order that this treachery might be revealed to him. The hot blood of youth! Oh, yes, one might make excuses, but when a lad had given his pledge to a girl like Rose, what human justification could he claim for surreptitious sex adventures? Damn it, Rose was not a girl to be loved—with reservations. She could and should hold all that was in a man in the first flush of romantic loving. Charlie Richmond would have given her all that was in him.

Mr. Slade's fists were clenched. By God, he would like to set about this young blackguard. Someone was whistling a tune from Gilbert and Sullivan, and Mr. Slade recognized it. "In for a penny, in for a pound." So that was the young gentleman's philosophy! He heard the sound of footsteps and that casual whistling dying away, and his anger and his disgust were potent. He knew now what to do. Clara should listen to him.

3

The staff of Highfield House was not the staff of the Caroline Hotel. It was more starched, more elevated, more full of manners, and the parlour-maid who opened the door to Mr. Slade and allowed the hall light to shine upon him, did not add to it the light of her countenance. She beheld a rather insignificant-looking old man who—so she thought—did not belong to her world.

"Is Mrs. Pomeroy in?"

"Yes."

"I wish to see her."

"What name, please?"

"Mr. Slade."

The woman allowed Mr. Slade into the hall. She did not ask him to sit down, but left him standing while she went to ask her mistress whether she would see the visitor.

"Yes, Alice?"

"A person named Slade, madam, wishing to see you."

Mrs. Pomeroy happened to be alone. The young people were in the billiard-room where Hector Hallard was giving Rose a lesson in the handling of a cue. Mrs. Pomeroy did not wish to see Mr. Slade. She would have been well content to hear that he had vanished from the earth, but she thought it advisable for her to discover why he had called on her.

"Send him in, Alice."

"Very well, madam."

Mr. Slade entered the Highfield drawing-room carrying his hat and wearing his overcoat. The room felt excessively warm to him, and he was to feel it to be very excessively warm before he left it. Mrs. Pomeroy had a book in her lap. She neither closed it nor troubled to lay it aside. Her solid serenity seemed adequate for any occasion.

She waited; she observed him; she left him standing and, since his silence seemed to express embarrassment, she prompted him.

"Well, Slade, what is it?"

Mr. Slade's silence was not due to embarrassment, but rather to the brittle stresses of his crisis.

"I wish to speak to you on a very serious matter, Clara."

There was an instant and angry hardening of her face. Her blue eyes menaced him. It was a look that said, "You exasperating fool! Why was I such an idiot as to rescue you?" She put her book aside. She rose, walked deliberately to the door, opened it, saw that the hall was empty, and reclosing the door, stood with her back to it.

"Now, what is it?"

Mr. Slade was not to be brow-beaten. This—to him—was a crusade for the setting free of souls.

"It is about Rose—and this engagement."

"I beg your pardon, Slade. I don't quite understand you."

So, that was to be her attitude; a high coloured and arrogant questioning of his status!

"I think you do, Clara."

"Please understand, Slade, that I am not to be addressed with such familiarity by my late porter."

Mr. Slade gave her a slight inclination of the head.

"Very well, madam. May I ask you a question?"

"That will depend—upon——"

But Mr. Slade got in his question.

"Do you know the reputation of the young man who is to marry—our—daughter?"

This was beyond bearing, and Mrs. Pomeroy flared.

"What do you mean? Are you suggesting——?"

"This young man is a dissolute blackguard."

"Be careful, Slade."

"I have no intention of being careful when a certain person's future is concerned."

"You listen to vulgar gossip?"

"No, I trust to my own eyes and ears. Would it surprise you to know that the young man is carrying on a common intrigue?"

"I don't believe it."

"Well, madam, ask him, ask him where he was last evening, and with whom. I happen to know."

Mrs. Pomeroy opened the door again, looked out into the hall, and re-closed the door.

"You old spy! Do you realize, Slade, that there is a law of libel?"

"It is not libel. It is the truth."

For a moment she was voiceless, biting her lips, her eyes a'flare.

"So, Slade, you think——"

"I am here, Clara, to appeal to you to stop this marriage."

"Indeed? Blackmail!"

"Oh, no. I gave you a certain promise, and I will keep it, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"You refrain from sacrificing—our child—to your social—swindle."

"Swindle! How dare you suggest——? Why, you fool, this is Rose's happiness. Your high moral ardour, Slade, has taken the wrong turning. What you are trying to do will destroy the girl's happiness, not—safeguard it. This is a love-match."

"Oh, Clara!"

"Yes, and I'll prove it to you, you interfering old hypocrite."

She was out of the room before he could stop her, or before he had realized what her purpose was. He heard her voice, loud and insistent. "Rose, Hector, my dears, I want you." James Slade was aware of a sudden feeling of emptiness in his stomach. He stood pressing his hat against it. Good God, he had not foreseen this counterstroke of Clara's! Its desperate audacity frightened him.

The door stood open, and Mr. Slade had a vision of a confident and affectionate Clara shepherding her young on to the stage. What a confrontation! And what a challenge! He saw these two as lovers, crossing the hall with their arms about each other. He saw his daughter's face. She was looking up at her lover, as at some wonderful and unique creature, and James Slade's courage failed him.

They were looking at him. Mrs. Pomeroy had closed the door, and had moved into the centre of the stage. She was smiling, gracious, confident.

"Rose, Hector, my dears, Mr. Slade is here—as an old friend—to wish you happiness."

James Slade looked at his daughter's face. It had a soft radiance; it was without a shadow.

"How kind of you, Mr. Slade."

James Slade was mute. He turned his eyes for a moment on the young man. Hector Hallard, too, was smiling. He gave Mr. Slade a condescending nod.

"Very decent of you, Mr. Slade."

Mrs. Pomeroy had posed herself by the fireplace, one foot on the kerb, a hand resting easily on the mantelpiece.

"Well, Slade, aren't you going to give your message?"

Mr. Slade looked at the face of his daughter. It was a happy face, so happy that its very happiness overwhelmed him. He was beaten. He could not blurt out those terrible and fatal words.

"Yes, madam. I'm sure I wish them both all that is best in the world. Love and honour—and——"

His voice failed him. He fumbled with his hat. He was aware of his daughter's shining eyes. Young Hallard was deigning to shake hands with him.

"Thanks, muchly, Mr. Slade."

"Yes, thank you ever so much, Slade."

James Slade made some human sort of noise, fidgeted, gave one glance at the gracious and defiant matron, and moved towards the door. His lips moved, seemed to be fumbling for some final message, but no words came. He was beaten.

XXVII

I

THERE came a period in James Slade's life when force seemed to fail in him, and he could not determine whether he was a fool or a wise man. And did it matter? Yet, when

a man asks himself that question, and a tired sadness answers, "Nothing matters", he may be in need of a tonic or a love-affair. Mr. Slade just persevered with his shop. He was supplying a need, and necessity and the faces and voices of his children propelled him. You could not be sour and smileless with the eager young coming to your counter, and if life was a sort of counter, Mr. Slade continued to serve at it.

Moreover, both young men had departed from Southfleet for a season, Charles to his hospital, Hector to Cambridge, and to James Slade the problem seemed a little less actual. There was one thing that surprised him, he could not find himself feeling bitter against Clara. Queer—that! Clara had out-manceuvred him, routed him, and remained in possession of the field of battle. Clara had been too clever for him. She had dared him to take that happy radiance from his daughter's face, and he had flinched from the judgment of Solomon. Was it possible that Clara had been wiser than she knew, and that this love-affair might not end in the old-fashioned way, and as the story books had it—"They lived happily ever after?"

Mr. Slade had surrendered. If this was life, then life must have its way. Let these young things take their chance, and sail their ship together, and perhaps make harbour. Life might bring them storms and trials, and even wreck them, but as Mr. Slade pondered the problem he was moved to feel that he had no right to play the wrecker.

His shop possessed him. Like many a man who has made a success of some enterprise, he discovered himself becoming the slave of his business. And, after all, it was a happy slavery. He had set out to sell toys, and he found himself making money, and friends. Every other Sunday, after taking the plate round in St. John's Church, he supped with the Golightly family. Mrs. Golightly was one of those buxom and comfortable women who had brought two comely daughters into the world, and whose two passions were her store-cupboard and the marriage market. She gave Mr. Slade prime cold beef and treacle tart,

and a broad-nosed and jocund smile. Mr. Golightly gave James advice. The new Golightly premises were going up, and Mr. Golightly's top-hat seemed to grow glossier and glossier.

"You'll have to move, old man."

"Move?"

"Yes, that little place won't hold you in a year's time."

But Mr. Slade did not want to move. His was a one-man show; he liked handling his toys in person; he had no wish to become a super-shopwalker, while assistants came between him and his children.

He liked to breakfast at eight, take his leisure, smoke his pipe and read his morning paper, and open the shop at nine. He found himself reading the sporting news, and especially the rowing news. The Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race! One morning he discovered that young Hallard was stroking the Cambridge Eight.

Mr. Slade did not quite know whether to be pleased or peeved. But, damn it, the lad must have some guts to be doing that! Was there not hope in this athleticism? It postulated a degree of austerity. And Rose must be proud and pleased. They were so very young, these two. Time might change their inclinations. But was not that a rather mean reflection?

"Gosh," said Mr. Slade to himself. "I have forgotten the Boat Race."

It behoved him to stock Light Blue and Dark Blue favours, rosettes and coloured birds on pins. He set out to remedy the omission, and cards bearing these colours appeared in the boys' window.

He had not seen his daughter since the night when her happy face had silenced him; but one morning, three days before the Boat Race, she walked into his shop.

"Oh, Mr. Slade, you have boat-race favours."

"Yes, Miss."

"I think yours is the only shop that has them."

Mr. Slade gave his daughter a shy little bow.

"I am very glad, Miss Rose, but I nearly forgot them."

She seemed more like her old self this morning, and less the stylish young madam. Mr. Slade felt mischievous. He took down a card of rosettes that was hanging on a hook.

"Let me see, Dark Blue, isn't it?"

"Oh, Mr. Slade!"

"Yes, of course, how silly of me."

"Hector—Mr. Hallard—is stroking the Cambridge Eight. I am going to see the race. I am sure they will win this year."

Someone else had come into the shop, and Miss Pomeroy and Mr. Slade were so absorbed in each other that they had not glanced at the visitor.

A voice said, "It's about time. They have lost six years running."

Mr. Slade's head went up with a jerk. Mr. Charles Richmond! Miss Pomeroy's pretty nose was in the air, but she ignored the interrupter.

"Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Are you going to keep tennis-balls, Mr. Slade?"

"I can do, sir. I haven't any at the moment."

"I am joining the new club. You might give me one of those coloured monkeys."

"Which—er—colour, sir?"

"Oh, Oxford, of course. They'll win again."

Rose flicked a sudden, snubbing look at him.

"No, they won't."

Charles laughed, and stuck the dark blue favour in his button-hole.

"Want to bet on it?"

"I'll bet you—anything—Cambridge wins."

"Wouldn't be fair," said Charles. "One oughtn't to bet on—certainties," and he paid Mr. Slade and walked out of the shop.

Mr. Slade picked up a duster, and made a show of dusting the counter. Miss Pomeroy had become head in air.

"Rather a wag, Mr. Charles."

"Oh, just a Medical Student. They never have any manners, Mr. Slade."

And she too walked out of the shop.

Cambridge lost the Boat Race, and Rose, witnessing the defeat of her hero and his crew—they were three lengths behind at Barnes and knocking up a lot of water—almost wept over it. That wretch Charles had brought them bad luck. Impulse made her forget the proper self-restraint that the Hallards cultivated in public, for, when her chance came, she embarrassed her hero by throwing her arms about his neck before others members of the crew.

"Darling, I'm so sorry. Aren't you dreadfully tired?"

Hector might be looking rather washed out, for, to do him justice, he had rowed himself blind, but her charming compassion was not quite up to form.

"Oh, I'm all right. Losing the toss did us."

He had other excuses to give when they were alone together. Numbers five and six had gone flabby, and had failed to back him properly when he had put in a critical spurt, and their cox had steered like an imbecile. Rose accepted these excuses with tender credulity, and hoped that Hector had not over-strained himself.

"You must come home and rest, darling."

Good God, what an idea! Didn't the child know that tradition compelled the crews to dine together, and go to The Empire or some such Temple of Joy, and paint things blue? Rose went home alone, having had her ignorance chastened, and Hector got furiously drunk, and was thrown out of his music-hall, and taken care of by the police. He returned to Southfleet with a black eye, and exhibited it with complacency.

The eye had to be explained to Rose. It was the symbol of manhood and honour. She accepted it. In fact she was rather impressed by it. Her Hector was no Verdant Green.

Mr. Slade wrapped up the unsold favours in tissue-paper

and put them away to do duty for next year's event. Poor Rose, her hero had lost the race! Mr. Slade heard about the black eye; in fact Mr. Hector Hallard exhibited it to Southfleet with an air of sleepy insolence. He was a devil of a fellow, and let the girls take note of it.

The next term was to be his last at Cambridge. He had spent a week-end with his uncle, Sir Bertie Hallard, at the great man's house in Regent's Park. Sir Bertie was not greatly enamoured of his nephew, but blood was thicker than water, and a Cambridge Rowing Blue would bring prestige to the firm.

Hector did not take a degree at Cambridge. He failed in his final, a distinction that was accorded to the most exclusive of sportsmen. What did it matter? A Blue was worth a whole cartload of B.A.'s. Rose was a little chagrined over his failure, until her hero pointed out to her that the real people did not bother about such academic favours. He was in good company. The Marquis of Malmesbury and Lord Tufton shared with him the distinction of having scorned the Rabbit Skin.

Mr. Hereward Hallard had, in his day, also failed to take a degree, but then he had inherited property of considerable value. Times had changed, and Mr. Hereward was candid with his son. Hector had proposed to spend a part of the summer in touring the country and in staying with various friends. He had been invited to shoot grouse in Scotland.

"No, you don't, my lad," said his father. "It is time you stopped playing about. I have arranged with Bertie for you to join the firm at once."

"Look here, pater, I——"

"Nothing doing, my lad."

And since Mr. Hereward held the purse, though it was not a very fat one, his son was compelled to conform.

Mr. Slade began to fix his dates, not by the Kings and Queens of England, or even by the festivals of the Church, but by the particular article that was in chief demand. In the main it was a male calendar, for dolls were perennial, and symbolical of the emotional slavery of women. There was the Bucket and Spade Season, the Hoop Season, the Soldier Season, which arrived towards Christmas when days were short and the weather completely English, and small boys had to amuse themselves indoors. But this year the Bucket and Spade Season was so hectic that all Mr. Slade's energies appeared to be concentrated on selling buckets and spades and ordering new supplies. Southfleet was becoming more and more popular with the East End of London, and excursion trains multiplied, and since "The Toy Mart" was on the direct road to the sea, every London child seemed to cast covetous eyes upon it.

Almost Mr. Slade was moved to acclaim, "Buckets and spades will be the death of me!" but not quite so. In fact he was finding his little world so much to his liking, and so packed with his particular brand of self-expression, that he was less posed by vicarious problems. He ate well, he slept well, he doted on his shop and his garden. Eliza spoilt him, and yet failed to spoil him. His bank balance flourished, and he was sufficiently human to feel good about it. His Sabbath shilling in the plate became a florin. He even developed a nice fancy in ties and socks. But Buckets and Spades challenged him. Something would have to be done about it.

It was Eliza who suggested the obvious remedy.

"You'll have to have a girl."

Eliza's meaning was not quite what it sounded. It was not Hallard, and Eliza had marked down and was ready to procure the lady. She had a niece, one Phoebe, who was a bright and good-tempered wench with a prejudice against domestic

service. Phoebe could live in. Phoebe could occupy the little top back bedroom.

So, Phoebe was engaged, a small, compact, pleasantly plain young woman, with a round, pale face, black hair, and a tip-tilted nose. Phoebe combined a sweet temper with a tart tongue, and an eye that could be gladsome. She took to Mr. Slade and the shop like a duck to water, and within a week she was presiding over the female side, and assisting in satisfying the clamour for buckets and spades.

Mr. Slade was a little puzzled about himself. He had seen it stated that one of the symptoms of old age was the dying down of the emotions. Was he growing old? He did not feel age creeping on him. He enjoyed his day's work and his dinner, and those forty winks after it, while Phoebe held the fort. In summer he liked to take his short nap in a long chair in the garden, a handkerchief over his face, and his hands folded upon his tummy. Eliza would respect that period of peace, and refrain from activities in the kitchen that might disturb his slumber.

"He earns it, bless his heart."

She would peer out of the window, and refrain from any clatter until she saw that handkerchief had been removed.

In fact, Mr. Slade was finding life comfortable, and so was tending to become steeped in philosophical calm. In cold weather he had a hot bottle in his bed, and a glass of hot milk last thing, if he desired it. He liked treacle tart and jam roll, and Eliza gave him treacle tart and jam roll without stint of jam or treacle. Mr. Slade's inner man was at peace, and God seemed to be present in the toy-shop. "Let the little children come unto me—" "Unless ye become as little children." Mr. Slade, perhaps without knowing it, was becoming more and more a child, not senilely so, but in his naturalness.

Highfield House had ceased to matter, nor was Clara a menace. Even his daughter's future gave him no sleepless

nights. Things just happened, and it was useless to wear the shirt-tails of your soul to shreds trying to sit down upon human passions. Rose wanted Hector. She would have her Hector, and perhaps make a decent citizen of him. Why put a maggot of doubt into her pretty head? Destroy a child's faith in things and the ultimate product may prove to be a bitter little cynic.

So, when it came to be known that Hector Hallard, Esq. and Miss Rose Pomeroy were to be married, Mr. Slade accepted the news with a gentle shrug of the shoulders. Rose was marrying her own problem. Putting poison in the pot would not help her to sweeten it. Actually, Mr. Slade received an invitation to the wedding, and he attended at St. John's Church with a white carnation in the buttonhole of his Sunday best, and a strange feeling of unreality in his heart. Here was his daughter being married, and he—her father—was not giving her away. Rather a dubious phrase, that! Mr. Grigson had accepted that responsibility, and Mr. Slade had wondered whom Clara would persuade to arm Rose up the church. Mr. Slade had sent his daughter a present, a silver cake-dish. He prayed for her happiness, but somehow he felt like an anonymous ghost sitting apart in the church and watching this pageant of the living. He saw Clara very gorgeous in purple velvet, and wholly the Duchess of Highfield. What, if a little piping ghostly voice had cried, "I forbid this marriage."

The ceremony was over. The young people and their relations disappeared into the vestry. The organ blared triumphantly. 'Oh, that Wedding March! He could remember arming Clara down the aisle. How exultantly that music played romance into a dusty corner! Mr. Slade stood and watched the happy pair pass down the aisle, young Hallard, spruce, smiling, and debonair, and looking as though he was conferring an infinite favour upon the world. Rose's face had a happy radiance, and Mr. Slade found himself saying, "Bless you, my dear. May you keep that happy look."

But he did not like that young man. No, young Hallard

was too strenuously pallid, too smart, too insolently complacent. A self-satisfied, supercilious young brute. Oh, come now, James Slade, don't be so prejudiced! He rubbed his hat with his sleeve and, waiting till the church was empty, walked out alone like the ghost he was.

The last of the carriages was rolling off to Highfield. Mr. Slade was not going to Highfield, and suddenly those massive and high holly hedges looked indubitably black to him. Prickles and gloom, and not orange blossom, and a young sensualist cuddling a girl in the darkness!

Something in Mr. Slade winced.

He rather wished that he did not know what he did know.

3

It occurred to him as he walked back up the High Street that Hector Hallard could have called him "Father". No, "Pater" of course, and behind his back "The Old Man", or something even more contemptuous. He did not feel at all paternal towards his son-in-law. Eliza was waiting for him, an Eliza who had refused to countenance this "'uman sacrifice", even as an uninvited spectator, or out of curiosity.

Eliza's candour took the last of the gloss from the occasion.

Had anybody wept? No, Mr. Slade confessed that he had not seen anyone in tears. In fact, both Miss Pomeroy and Mr. Hallard had looked particularly pleased with themselves.

"Ah, that's bad," said Eliza gloomily, "my mother always did say that the bride who hadn't a tear in her eye, had plenty before the year was out."

Mr. Slade protested.

"Really, Eliza, it needn't be as bad as that!"

"I suppose—she—was all toggled up?"

"You mean the bride?"

"No, Mrs. P."

"Well, yes, in a sense she was, Eliza."

Eliza sniffed.

“Well, if I was marrying a girl of mine to a thing like that, I’d have put on black. Give me a fooner, Mr. Slade. You do know the trouble’s over. Poor young thing, hers is only beginning.”

XXVIII

I

MR. and Mrs. Hector Hallard returned from their honeymoon to the little house on the Cliff Parade which Mrs. Pomeroy had purchased and presented to them as a wedding present. It was a charming little Love Box, white and low, with a green veranda and green shutters, a minute garden back and front, and a spacious view of the sea. Mrs. Pomeroy had furnished it at her own expense and according to her own taste, and old Hallard confessed that Mrs. Pomeroy had been very geneous. She had spent more than two thousand pounds in floating her social enterprise, a thousand as her share of Hector’s premium, and the rest upon the house and furniture.

“Mon Repos” was the little place’s name. It would have been described by the house agents as a Bijou Residence, and every morning at eight-thirty Mr. Hector Hallard set out for the City, in top hat and tail coat, exquisitely-creased trousers and white spats. His wife, affectionately clasping his arm, sped him Citywards from the green iron gate. Mr. Hector Hallard travelled first, and was ready to talk finance to his elders with the assurance of a young man who knew nothing about it. He was not popular with the City fathers who travelled with him daily. More than one elderly gentleman was seen to leave the compartment and seek another when Mr. Hector Hallard entered it.

“No, sir, I can’t stomach that damned young prig.”

Mr. Slade liked to take a stroll after closing the shop, and a natural curiosity, and perhaps some naughtiness, moved him to walk once or twice a week past "Mons Repos", and on to "Highfield". It was extraordinary how many glimpses you got of other people's lives by strolling past their shop-windows, and poking your nose over hedges and fences.

"Mon Repos" possessed a euonymus hedge behind its low iron railings. It was just possible to see over it if you were on your feet, but not if you were sitting down. Mr. Slade frequently passed by "Mons Repos" shortly after Mr. Hector Hallard had returned from his labour in the City, and would discover him in a long chair, with a garden table beside him, and upon it a whisky decanter and a siphon. Strange, that youth should need such a stimulus after a somewhat sedentary day!

Mr. Slade, in some of his passings, saw Mrs. Hector Hallard sitting in a garden chair, diligently sewing. The articles upon which she was engaged were somewhat suggestive, and so was the young wife's figure. She looked stouter and more matronly, and suddenly James Slade tumbled to the situation.

"Good Lord, I am going to be a grandfather!"

These peripatetic snoopings on the part of Mr. Slade provided him with the gradual impression that Mr. Hector Hallard was bored. Neither he nor his young wife appeared to have much to say to each other, but Mr. Slade did happen upon one illuminating incident. Rose had upon her knees one very suggestive garment, and with sudden playfulness that was not without pathos, she leaned over and draped it over her husband's head.

"Guess, Tor, what that is."

Mr. Hector was not intrigued. In fact, he appeared to be irritated by this intimate challenge. He snatched the thing off, glanced at it and, holding it by one corner between finger and thumb, deposited it in his wife's lap.

"Not funny. Don't be sloppy."

Mr. Slade saw his daughter flush. She stood up with the garment in her hands, looked rather strangely at her mate, and then turned and walked into the house.

One evening later in the summer Mr. Slade was surprised to find that the hedge had disappeared. So had Mrs. Hector Hallard, but the young gentleman was there with his whisky and soda, semi-prone and flaccid. Was Mr. Hallard becoming bored with domestic bliss? Mr. Slade had paused, for his son-in-law was not interested in old gentlemen in bowler hats and Mr. Slade might not have been visible. As a matter of fact he was not visible, but just as he was about to pass on he saw something happen to Mr. Hallard's face. It came alive. Eyes and teeth gleamed. Mr. Hallard was sitting up and taking notice. He waved to someone.

Mr. Slade moved on until he was out of the picture, and then turned to look towards the broad cliff path on the other side of the roadway. Two colourful young women were passing by, and one of them was throwing an oblique and backward glance at Mr. Hallard. So that was it! Mr. Slade rubbed his chin, and walked on, meditating upon that suggestive incident. A sensual young man whose wife was in a certain negative condition, might be provoked into seeking sexual satisfaction elsewhere. Mr. Slade did not like the taste of that thought. Some thoughts can go rancid almost before you think them.

He found himself contemplating the architectural falsity of "Highfield", bastard French, and bad at that. What trickiness—what a Château of Snobbery! The gates were open, and Mr. Slade could see the sleek lawns, and the beds of geranium, and the chaste, weedless drive. Was Clara happy now that her ideals were consummated? What did such a busy, bouncing woman do with herself now that she was a lady of leisure? Did she miss her daughter? Mr. Slade became aware of a tiny white handbill attached to one of the gate-pillars. He approached it and read.

"Hospital Fête and Bazaar."

"To be held in the grounds of 'Highfield House' on August 25th. By the kind permission of Mrs. Pomeroy."

Mr. Slade stared at it. Ye Gods, Clara was taking to good works! Well, well, well! There were urges—and urges. But was not philanthropy sometimes the last resource of the vaguely disillusioned? Clara must have her bone to bite upon. She had to spend her superabundant energy. She was becoming a Lady of the Lamp, though the oil—like that other impression of his—might be a little rancid.

2

Nor was that the end of the story. One morning a week later, Mr. Slade happened to be dressing a window when the Highfield carriage stopped outside his shop. It contained Mrs. Pomeroy and her daughter, who was in an interesting condition, and a pale, thin gentlewoman in black, whose eyes had a frightened prominence. This was Miss Mossett, Mrs. Pomeroy's lately-engaged companion and secretary, poor wretch, a new slave of the lamp.

Apparently, Miss Mossett was told to get out of the carriage, and deliver a message to Mr. Slade. She minced across the pavement, and seeing Mr. Slade as a live exhibit in the window, she tapped upon the window and made little noises, or that was how they reached Mr. Slade. She looked rather like a fish mouthing at another fish in a separate glass tank.

Mr. Slade slid backwards from the window into the shop and spoke to Phoebe.

"Phoebe, my dear, there is a lady outside who appears to want something. Will you please find out."

Phoebe walked out of the shop and returned in ten seconds.

"She says Mrs. Pomeroy wants you."

Mr. Slade smiled sweetly.

"You can tell the lady to tell Mrs. Pomeroy that if she wants to speak to me she will find me in the shop."

Phoebe crinkled up her naughty nose at Mr. Slade, and nodded her head in approval. Mrs. Pomeroy, in spite of her new philanthropic adventures, was becoming less and less popular in the town. Her arrogance, even when it smiled condescendingly, remained arrogance. So suave a person as Mr. Golightly had been moved to treat Mrs. Pomeroy with polite but offended dignity. Poor Miss Mossett had to return to the carriage and deliver that ultimatum to her new tyrant.

"He says you will find him in the shop."

Mrs. Pomeroy sat for a moment, as though savouring this snub. Then, she left the carriage, and crossed the pavement to the shop door, where Phoebe stood observing the world as she saw it. Mrs. Pomeroy paused, as though expecting the girl to open the door, but Phoebe did not do so, and Mrs. Pomeroy had to open the door for herself.

She entered. She found Mr. Slade behind a counter, engaged in making a selection of toys with which to complete the dressing of his window. Mr. Slade looked at her with the eyes of a man who could see humour in the incident, but Mrs. Pomeroy was not amused.

"Good morning, Slade."

"Good morning, madam."

"I sent you in a message. May I ask if you received it?"

Mr. Slade's hands were resting tranquilly on the lid of a cardboard box.

"I gather, madam, that you wished to see me."

"I did."

"My place, madam, happens to be behind my counter."

Did Phoebe snigger? Mrs. Pomeroy turned her head sharply, and regarded the girl.

"May I ask, Mr. Slade, if you do not owe some courtesy to your customers?"

"I do, madam, most certainly, in my shop. What can I do for you? Please take a chair."

Mrs. Pomeroy refused the chair, and remained standing.

"I had intended offering you, Slade, an opportunity that might have been of considerable value to you."

Mr. Slade waited attentively and in silence, his hands at rest.

"Perhaps you have heard that we are holding a fête and a bazaar—for the cottage hospital."

"Yes, madam, I had heard something of it."

Mrs. Pomeroy bent a stately head.

"Very good. I had intended offering you the chance of opening a toy-stall—at my expense—at our bazaar, but as you do not seem——"

Mr. Slade, with a little bow, gently interrupted her.

"No, madam, I could not accept such a favour. It would have been at my own expense. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

There was not, most obviously not. Mrs. Pomeroy turned towards the door, and Mr. Slade spoke to Phoebe.

"Open the door, please, for the lady."

Phoebe did so. She winked at Mr. Slade behind Mrs. Pomeroy's back, but Mr. Slade did not return the wink.

"Phoebe, my dear——"

Phoebe waited.

"The more difficult the customer—the more polite one must be in suffering and serving."

Phoebe giggled.

"Yes, Mr. Slade. But you did put her out, didn't you?"

3

There were two human happenings in the January of that winter, happenings which were intimately related to the life history of James Slade. His daughter bore a son, and Mr. Slade fell dangerously ill. He had overworked himself during the Christmas rush, and had gone forth on a bitter January morning to lay a wreath of holly on Mr. Truslove's grave. He came back looking chilled and feeling shivery. Next day he was in bed, and the diagnosis was acute pneumonia.

Mr. Slade, propped up in bed, flushed, panting, with a kind of bright anguish in his eyes, was the centre of a little circle of devotion. Eliza was up and down stairs, grim and untiring. Phoebe would put her head into the room, and assure Mr. Slade that everything was well with the shop. Dr. Richmond came twice a day. A trained nurse was brought in. Mr. Golightly called to say that if Mr. Slade needed help, an assistant could be loaned to him.

Mr. Slade was worried about something, nor did he surrender himself to the struggle until he had given expression to the need that was in him.

"I haven't made a will, doctor. I must."

Dr. Richmond was wise as a physician. The effort expended in such a piece of business might be less exhausting than the frustrated fretting of a sick man.

"Need it take long? I don't want you——"

"No, sir. It would go into six lines."

Dr. Richmond sent Mr. Grigson to Mr. Slade, and in three minutes or so the thing was done. Mr. Slade's estate was to be divided into three equal portions, one for Mrs. Hector Hallard, one for Eliza, one for the Southfleet Cottage Hospital in the shape of a Memorial Bed to Mr. John Truslove. Mr. Grigson drew up this simple testament, and Phoebe and the nurse witnessed Mr. Slade's signature. His writing was strangely steady for so sick a man, though the nurse had to sit behind him and support him while he used the pen.

Then he lay back with a sigh and a funny little smile.

"That's all in order, sir?"

"Quite, Mr. Slade, but my hope is that we shall not need it."

"Well, it's done, sir; anyway, it's done."

Eliza, hearing of the solemn affair from Phoebe, was at first surprised and hurt. Why had not she been called to serve in this grave event? Eliza's eyes filled with tears, but Phoebe was able to comfort her.

"But—you couldn't, Auntie."

"And why not? I've——"

"Because you may be—interested."

"Interested! Of course I'm interested."

"I mean—he—left you something. I did happen to peek—and see your name there."

"Bless me, leaving—me—money!"

Phoebe nodded.

"Why not? You've been a good friend to him, haven't you?"

4

Dr. Richmond brought a small Hallard into the world, a lusty, squalling little bit of flesh that seemed to be more Rose than Hector. Mrs. Pomeroy had remained at "Mon Repos" while the ordeal was in progress, though her son-in-law went to bed on the sofa and slept through most of it. Marriage could be a boring business, with a house full of women, and especially this particular woman. Mrs. Pomeroy was like a large and vigorous animal who had crowded herself into a small hutch, and the little house appeared to vibrate with her activities. Hector and his mother-in-law were becoming more and more unsympathetic towards each other. In fact, Mr. Hallard thought of her as "That damned, interfering, fat old bitch."

Mrs. Pomeroy, finding him asleep just when the crisis was at hand, woke him with some abruptness.

"Wake up, Hector."

He blinked at her with those sulky, sleepy, insolent eyes of his.

"What's the trouble?"

Mrs. Pomeroy was shocked.

"Trouble indeed! Surely a husband should concern himself——"

"How does that help?"

"Your callousness astonishes me."

"I'm just dead tired, that's all."

"What about poor Rose?"

But Mrs. Pomeroy made such a nuisance of herself, and was so greased with complacency when her grandson was born, that Dr. Richmond, who had been exasperated by her interferences, was sufficiently human to plant a barb in her maternal bosom. It was a subtle shaft, and as a student of human nature, he was interested in watching its effect.

"Yes, life and death, Mrs. Pomeroy. Have you heard that poor old Mr. Slade is desperately ill?"

Mrs. Pomeroy appeared to catch her breath and grow rigid. Her voluble face suddenly became still. Dr. Richmond might have injected a dose of some potent drug into her large body.

"Poor Slade!"

"Yes, acute pneumonia."

"I'm so sorry."

But her sorrow beamed. There was a sudden, secret relief in her eyes. With James Slade dead and buried her unpleasant secret might be buried with him. Almost, the news roused in her a grateful tenderness. Poor, silly, ineffectual James! Could she not afford to pity him—dead? Then, Dr. Richmond, who was observing her, detected another change of face. Alarm—dismay. What if the poor wretch babbled, or left some revealing document behind him? She became a little breathless.

"Is he conscious, doctor?"

"Quite."

"I really must go and see him."

Dr. Richmond was reflecting upon her obvious agitation.

"I'm afraid that is not possible. No visitors allowed."

"As bad as that. Really, I——"

"He has made his will."

Dr. Richmond left the lady with that barb in her bosom.

Yes, he had disconcerted her, and considerably so. She was terrified lest the old man should blab. Dr. Richmond had no illusions about certain sorts of women. But he was careful to give orders to the nurse and to Eliza that no one was to be admitted on any excuse whatsoever. Mr. Slade's condition was critical, and no draught of emotion must be allowed to play upon the flickering flame.

Mrs. Pomeroy attempted to disobey the doctor. She went on foot to "The Toy Mart", rang the bell at the side door, and was confronted by Eliza.

"Oh, Eliza, this is sad news——"

Eliza had the face of a stubborn, uncomprehending cow.

"Very, madam."

"I really must see the poor man. He was with us so long, Eliza; so devoted a servant."

Eliza was thinking, "Now—what the sanguinary hell is your game? Devoted servant, indeed! Fiddlesticks."

"Sorry, madam; no visitors allowed."

"But, Eliza, dear——"

"Doctor's orders," and very firmly she closed the door upon Mrs. Pomeroy.

XXIX

I

MRS. POMEROY passed through the next few days in a state of singular agitation. She had no need to worry about her daughter or her grandson, for both mother and child were doing well, but she was seriously disturbed about Mr. Slade. So he had made a will! Might not the contents of that will prove catastrophic and revealing? And could a man make a will without betraying his identity? What if Slade became Pomeroy?

It would appear that Mrs. Pomeroy had become far more sensitive to public opinion since her elevation to social eminence, for the higher you climbed the more considerable might be your fall. Maybe she began to regret the crude and somewhat fantastic punishment she had imposed upon the man who had disgraced the name of Pomeroy, and that she realized that your bread might be returned to you in a state of sour corruption. Not that there was any change of heart in Clara, only an adaptation to a very formidable crisis. She had been unwise in letting her spite exercise itself on this futile little man. She should have pensioned him off and packed him away in some obscure corner of England.

What should she do about it? Attempt a second storming of "The Toy Mart", and a tearful reconciliation with poor James? She could appeal to him not to reveal the fact that Rose's boy was the grandson of a criminal. But there was that sullen old creature Eliza, standing in the way. How much did that wretched woman know? Had poor James been delirious and babbled of strange secrets? Mrs. Pomeroy was in such a state of agitation that her temper became explosive.

It clashed with her son-in-law's, for Hector had had more than enough of his mother-in-law's presence. Was the house his or was it not? This damned old woman was still occupying the spare-room bed, though Highfield was less than a quarter of a mile away, and she pervaded the house like a perpetual draught. Hector, returning from the City, found Mrs. Pomeroy still established in "Mons Repos", and destroying for him any repose which the damned little box possessed.

"Still here, mater!"

Of course she was still there, occupying his particular chair like an old hen on a clutch of eggs.

"Rose is better to-day, I think."

"There is nothing wrong with Rose," said Hector, "and if you will excuse me saying so, I'd like the spare-room for myself. I'm rather bored with a shakedown on the sofa."

The challenge was so obvious that Mrs. Pomeroy countered it by pretending not to comprehend.

"Of course you must be, but I like to be near Rose. A mother does."

Hector stood, hands in pockets, looking at her with cold-eyed disrelish.

"Quite so, but I married your daughter, not the two of you. I shall be obliged if you will leave your daughter to me."

What impudence! How intolerable to a mother who had done everything to make two young people happy!

"How dare you speak to me like this?"

Hector drawled at her.

"It seems to be necessary. Let's understand this business. Mothers-in-law are supposed to be a joke, but this one is growing rather stale with me. I shall be grateful if you will go back to Highfield and leave me—my—house."

Mrs. Pomeroy spluttered.

"Your—house! Well, I like that! Where would you have been if I hadn't——"

Hector rattled his money and his keys.

"Did you buy me—as well as the house? I think not. We Hallards have a prejudice against being bossed by our women."

Mrs. Pomeroy flounced up in a fury. To have such insolent ingratitude imposed upon her just when she was so worried!

"I—never—did! Most certainly I will not stay in a house where I'm treated with such——"

"Thanks," said Hector, "that will solve the problem so far as I am concerned."

But Mrs. Pomeroy had to have her scene, and she had it with her daughter. She left poor Rose flushed and weakly hot with exhaustion, but more inclined to side with Hector, though Hector was ceasing to be the hero he had been.

"I think you had better go, mother."

"Of course I shall go. And I shall not enter this house again until Hector has apologized."

The Hallards did not apologize. It was not in the family tradition. Mr. Hereward sympathized with his son, and having obtained all the benefits that might be expected from the lady, he could allow his natural aversion its self-expression. She had helped to take Hector off his hands and settle him in life, and old Hereward, who was as selfish as his son, had not been sorry to be relieved of a troublesome liability.

"A woman like that has to be kept in her place."

Hector helped himself to his father's whisky, and Mr. Hereward kept a mistrustful eye on the decanter.

"I shall do it, pater. Because you have married a woman's daughter she seems to think she can run your show like a charity-school. I hear that she will not cross our doorstep unless I apologize."

His father gave a dry chuckle.

"Well, the thing is not to apologize."

"Obviously," and Hector pressed the trigger of the soda-water siphon.

2

Mrs. Pomeroy, driving out in her furs, saw Dr. Richmond's dogcart approaching "Mon Repos". Mrs. Pomeroy had no intention—for the moment—of stopping at "Mon Repos". She was on her dignity, and her self-restraint would be transferred to her cheque book, but she wanted a word with Dr. Richmond.

"Stop, Gates. I wish to speak to the doctor."

Dr. Richmond's dogcart had pulled up, and seeing that Mrs. Pomeroy's carriage was stopping, he went to speak to her. The absence of the lady from "Mon Repos", and the sudden peace that had reigned there, had provoked him to ask his patient whether her mother was ill.

Rose had confessed to him.

"No. I'm afraid my mother and my husband have had a little——"

"Difference of opinion."

"Yes."

Dr. Richmond could suppose that Mrs. Pomeroy, in the son-in-law's absence, was visiting her daughter, but it was not so. Mrs. Pomeroy showed no disposition to leave her carriage. She bent to Dr. Richmond with an air of gracious concern, and asked him the question he had expected her to ask.

"Oh, doctor, how is poor Slade?"

Richmond hesitated for a moment. Should he give a twist to the barb he had planted in her abundant bosom? Her buxomness should have postulated the milk of human kindness, but there was a vulgar saying in the profession that fat could be cold.

"A little better, I am glad to say."

Mrs. Pomeroy's bosom appeared to expand under her furs.

"I am so glad. Is the poor man out of danger?"

Dr. Richmond was inexorably grave.

"Not quite, but there is—hope."

"I am so glad. Please convey to him my sincerest sympathy."

How stately a phrase! Almost, it was episcopal, and Dr. Richmond raised his hat to the lady, and turned towards the gate of "Mon Repos". Well, well, perhaps the Richmond family had had a happy escape, for though Charles had been charmed by the daughter, neither he nor his son nor his son's mother would have found Mrs. Pomeroy anything but—cold and oppressive fat!

None the less, Dr. Richmond had been disingenuous in his statement to Mrs. Pomeroy, for Mr. Slade was out of danger, and enjoying that strange sense of surrender and of peace in which the spirit can steep itself when the body chooses to be healed. Mr. Slade sat propped up in bed, with a bright fire burning, and the winter sun laughing in at the window. His breath came gently, in and out like little waves on a windless

summer morning. No more struggles, no more pectoral anguish. He just lay and floated in a daze of sweet serenity. Everybody had been so good to him, so surprisingly good. Eliza, Phoebe, his nurse, the dear doctor, and an astonishing number of unexpected people. Poor Eliza, when the good news had been given her, had come into his room, sat down beside the bed, and blubbed. He had had to do the comforting, patting that solid hand.

"There, there, Eliza. I don't know what I should have done without you."

"Boo-hoo," sobbed Eliza, "we've all been so——"

"You've all been very good to me."

Mr. Slade had confronted with eyes of childish astonishment the human tributes that had been brought into his room. Mrs. Richmond had sent him hot-house flowers. Mr. Gollightly's young man was assisting Phoebe in the shop. Messages and inquiries had poured in but the things that had touched Mr. Slade most tenderly had been offerings from some of his children. Sprawling, infantile letters.

Dear Mr. Slade,

Do get well soon. I want you to be my Valentine.

Polly.

Evangeline had sent him two oranges, Ethel a box of chocolates.

Mr. Slade had asked to have these—as yet uneatable—offerings, placed on the table beside his bed. Phoebe wrote for him grateful letters.

Dear Polly,

It will make me very happy to be your Valentine. I am going to get well.

With love,

Uncle Slade.

Mr. Slade was very happy. At the end of the third week his friends were allowed to visit him, with Eliza in charge of the time-piece. The Rev. Mr. Chatterway came and made jokes, and so did Mr. Golightly, though their respective humour differed in flavour. Mr. Grigson was briefly grave and kind. Mrs. Richmond brought more flowers, and an order that he was not to tire himself by talking.

"If you will excuse me, madam, there is no need."

"Is my face a conversation piece, Mr. Slade?"

"I just like to lie and look at it, madam."

Mrs. Richmond laughed that shy and delightful little laugh of hers.

"Almost, Mr. Slade, you persuade me to look in my mirror."

"Life—is your mirror, madam."

Mr. Slade seemed very apt and quick in his repartee. He could say to himself, "I don't know what I have done to deserve all this kindness", but in one direction his conjectures were befogged. He did wonder a little whether those who were nearest to him in the flesh had shown any human interest in his survival. Did they know, and if they knew, had even the most conventional advance been made? Mr. Slade was shy of asking that question. His mood was so serene and gentle that he was ready to forgive everybody anything and everything.

But no note or gift lay there either from his wife or his daughter, and the absence caused Mr. Slade to suffer a secret pang. After all, blood was thicker than orange juice, and paternity more than a bottle of physic.

At last he asked the question.

"Eliza, did Miss Rose, or her mother——? How silly of me, I mean Mrs. Hallard——"

Eliza stood with her hands folded over her tummy.

"*She* called once, but I wouldn't let her in. Doctor's orders."

"I'm glad she called. And——"

"No, nothing from Mrs. Hector. You see, she's had a baby, and I expect she——"

"A baby, Eliza?"

"Yes, a boy."

Mr. Slade lay staring at the fire. Dear, dear, how surprising! He was a grandfather! But he did rather wish that his daughter had remembered him. Yet why should she? She must be loving the young and not thinking of the old, and what was he but old Slade who had carried up the coal and cleaned the silver?

XXX

I

MR. SLADE felt a little less happy when, for the first time, he had his clothes on.

"Dear me, Eliza, I'm as weak as a ——"

"Of course you are," said Eliza; "you've been at death's door. Now, no tricks, mind."

It might be February, but Mr. Slade had a hunger for fresh air, and he could not let these women go on coddling him. Moreover, he was to be Polly's Valentine, and he was moved to celebrate his recovery by giving a party. Phoebe applauded the idea, but Eliza was less enthusiastic. Cakes, etc.? Oh, yes, she would not mind making the cakes, but she was not going to permit Mr. Slade to tire himself out.

"But I want my party, Eliza."

"I dare say you do, Dad."

"You and Phoebe can give it, and I'll be just one of the—kids."

Eliza looked at him maternally.

"That's just what you are, James Slade, a blessed kid."

"Well, let me have my party, Eliza?"

And, of course, he had his party.

It was given in the shop, after closing hour. Eliza and Phoebe arranged a long table between the counters. There was Christmas cake with pink icing, and jam sandwiches, and fancy cakes, and crackers, and oranges and nuts, and a bran-tub for lucky dips. Mrs. Eliza presided, and kept an eye on Mr. Slade. It was a very successful and happily noisy party. Everyone wore paper caps, and Polly, having found a golden crown in her cracker, crowned her Valentine with it. When the table was cleared away, and the oranges and nuts had been scrambled for, they played Blind Man's Buff, and Kiss in the Ring. Everybody seemed to want to catch Mr. Slade and kiss him. And Mr. Slade kissed Eliza, and Eliza blushed.

When the children had gone and the excitement was over Mr. Slade suddenly felt tired. His eyes were saying: "The Dustman's coming," and his legs were protesting.

"I think I'll go to bed, Eliza."

"Yes, you will."

Mr. Slade refused to be helped. He tottered upstairs, still wearing his paper crown, and sat down on the bed. His heart was going lumpety-lump, and he could feel the beat in his ears. Dear, dear, how weak this wretched illness had left him! He sat on the bed and undressed in sections, and groped for his night-shirt. He was beginning to feel cold, and the bed would be cold. But it wasn't. Someone had slipped two hot-water bottles into it, and Mr. Slade snuggled down with a sigh of relief and pulled the clothes up to his chin. Really, these women were spoiling him! But he rather liked it, especially on a night such as this.

Came a knock at the door. It was Eliza with a glass of hot milk. She eyed him maternally.

"Gone and overtired yourself, haven't you. You drink that down."

"Yes, Eliza. But it was a lovely party, wasn't it?"

"I won't say as it wasn't. But you'll stay in bed to-morrow."

"But, Eliza——"

"Yes, you will."

And he did.

2

Mr. Slade missed his grandson's christening, and had he been present he might have found certain incidents to intrigue him. A very radiant young mother held George Hereward in her arms, and became quite concerned when Mr. Chatterway's application of cold water produced a storm. Mrs. Pomeroy, of course, was present, but somewhat upon her dignity. The proud father stood by, looking less bored than usual, for somehow this little bit of raw humanity amused him.

A closed carriage was waiting outside St. John's Church and before he was driven home George Hereward had to be introduced to a number of ladies. They made foolish noises at him, and the usual sentimental remarks, and argued as to which parent he resembled.

"He's just like his mother."

"No, I think he is more like his father."

Hector stood looking with a little snicker of a smile at his son. There was no compliment in the suggested likeness.

"Well, if you ask me, I think he is just like that funny old thing who keeps the toy-shop. Name of Slade, I believe."

Mrs. Pomeroy was shocked. She held up gloved hands of horror.

"Hector, how can you say such a thing!"

It was indeed a dreadful thing, this innocent creature resembling his grandfather! Meanwhile, George Hereward showed signs of taking after his father. He did not like plain old women, and all these large faces looming at him. He set up a rebellious squalling, and had to be hurried into the carriage.

Said Hector to his wife as they drove homewards, "Well, I don't wonder. The brat has some taste."

Rose was attending to her son's wet and bubbling chin.

"Poor darling, did all the——"

"Old cats claw and howl!"

"Really, Tor, you must admit he behaved——"

"Yes, damn it, just as I should have behaved. Go it, slaver away, my son. Did the nasty old women——"

"They are not nasty old women."

"Well, that's just a question of taste."

Yet, that ridiculous remark of her son-in-law's had remained in Mrs. Pomeroy's mind. Was the child really like his grandfather? Supposing her grew up to be a second Slade? Mrs. Pomeroy was passing through that period when a woman is subject to strange flushes and discomforts, both physical and emotional, a period that may exaggerate all her natural disharmonies. Also, she was not finding the solitary life at Highfield sufficient to satisfy her passion to possess and to rule. Bullying poor Miss Mossett was poor sport, and Good Works lacked the spice of combat. Mrs. Pomeroy had attempted to dominate certain committees upon which she served, and not very successfully so. She roused more resentment than co-operation. She had passed the crest of her career, and was slipping towards the trough, and was conscious of it, and in her present state liable to sudden storms of anger. She could become almost hysterical when these flushes were on her, a red-faced, turbulent hag, as the Hallards, father and son, might have described her.

For Mrs. Pomeroy was suffering her first defeat at the hands of her son-in-law. Hector could be cold, polite and sarcastic. He kept his temper when she lost hers, and his tongue was like a wet towel flicking her inflamed and angry face. Moreover, Rose sided with her husband, and having discovered a new possessiveness since the coming of her son, she showed a combative spirit in countering the matriarch in her mother.

For, Mrs. Pomeroy, evading her son-in-law, would appear at "Mon Repos", and attempt to dominate the nursery, and

demonstrate to her daughter how a baby should be handled. Rose was nursing George Hereward, and even over this very natural function mother and daughter quarrelled.

Mrs. Pomeroy asserted that such a thing was not ladylike, and Rose flared.

"What nonsense! What are a woman's breasts for?"

"Don't be vulgar, dear."

"Mother, I shall be much obliged if you will not interfere."

But Mrs. Pomeroy could not keep her hands from meddling, and Rose appealed to Hector.

"She comes here and makes scenes, and upsets the child. What shall I do?"

Hector pinched his son's nose.

"That's quite simple. Lock the front door, and let her ring. After drawing a few blanks she'll give it up."

Rose took her husband's advice, and Mrs. Hallard's neighbour witnessed the unseemly farce of Mrs. Pomeroy ringing with persistence the bell of "Mon Repos", and without result. She was left upon the doorstep, fuming, and rapping indignantly upon a stubborn door. There was no response, and Mrs. Pomeroy was compelled to retreat to her carriage, under the cynical gaze of Gates, her coachman. Mrs. Pomeroy felt herself to be a much wronged woman, yet Southfleet's sympathies were with the young people.

Gates, describing the incident in the Highfield kitchen, had an appreciative audience.

"Gosh, if they didn't lock the old woman out. You should have seen her face!"

The staff was to see it, in due course, and it did not inspire either respect or affection.

It is said that insanity is often an exaggeration of our more normal emotions and our whimsies, and considered by normal standards Clara Pomeroy was not quite sane. The change of life was upon her, and almost symbolically so, and she was

like a spoilt child, who, unused to being thwarted, flew into sinister rages. Her high colour was more than mere high colour. Her eyes looked more prominent and strained, and perpetually angry. And poor Miss Mossett was almost in perpetual tears.

Any sort of opposition, however trivial, brought on these attacks of mental blood-pressure, and in searching for some object upon which to concentrate her anger she fastened most strangely upon James Slade. Here was a creature who had failed her, fooled her, and in a sense—defied her. James Slade had eluded the judgment she had attempted to impose upon him. He was daring to live happily and successfully in the same town.

James Slade would have to be removed.

She walked into his shop one morning, and found him with two of his young customers. She sat down. She said, "I wish to speak to you on business, Slade. I will wait." Mr. Slade, suddenly wise as to the crisis, nodded at Phoebe who was behind the other counter, and when Phoebe and the children had gone, he came round from behind the counter and locked the shop door.

"What can I do for you, madam?"

"I must insist upon your leaving this town, Slade."

The demand was as abrupt as her voice. She spoke, not only with authority, but with the assumption that her order would be obeyed, and James Slade, looking down into his wife's face, saw in it a ravaged strangeness. How different from the face of the girl he had married! Something was the matter with Clara.

"And why should I leave this town, madam?"

"Oh, stop this nonsense. This hypocrisy and make-believe cannot continue. I am tired of all this humbug."

James Slade looked at her attentively.

"Why should I be the one to leave? Why not you?"

She tossed her head at him.

"? What impudence! I—hold a position in this town. You are a mere——"

"Tradesman, Clara."

"Exactly. I was a fool to bring you here. I realize that now. I should have left you——"

"Dead to the world, Clara! Are you not being a little—unguarded?"

"Unguarded indeed! I warn you that unless you leave this town, I shall expose you."

Mr. Slade stood regarding her with gentle astonishment. Yes, something was very wrong with Clara. This distortion of her previous pose was, like her face, somehow the product of a ravaged and insane egoism. He spoke to her gently.

"I don't think you quite know what you are saying."

"Don't be a fool. I do. I shall receive sympathy for all that I have suffered, while you—will be exposed——"

"And Rose?"

"My daughter has not behaved to me as a daughter should. As for her husband——"

Mr. Slade was shocked. So, even in this last revelation of herself Clara was betraying an intractable egoism which could sacrifice—— Well, she could not be quite sane. She must be a sick woman, sick in soul.

"Do you realize, my dear, what you are suggesting?"

"Don't my dear me, James."

"Hadn't you better see a doctor?"

"I shall do no such thing. I will give you a week, Slade, to think it over."

"You can give me a year, Clara, and my decision will be the same. I shall stay. I have some right to a little happiness."

She rose. She towered over him.

"Very well. You—have been the cause of all my miseries and my misfortunes——"

"Oh, Clara!"

"Unlock the door, please."

He unlocked it.

"Think again, Clara, before you make your choice."

3

What a catechism!

Mr. Slade did not quite know what to make of it. He could not say that he felt frightened, though he did not welcome being reintroduced to his world as a man who had received a lengthy sentence for fraud. And yet, he had been so near to the next world that the present world seemed a somewhat different place, and he—so serene and above human disharmonies that no crisis could scare him. But Rose? And Clara herself? Had she no understanding of the more subtle and complex reactions that might manifest themselves against herself? Yes, that always had been the trouble with Clara. When she had suffered from one of her rages there was nothing else but lightning and thunder in her world.

Who could advise her?

The only person in Southfleet who knew his secret was Dr. Richmond, and to Dr. Richmond James Slade went, for Richmond was Mrs. Pomeroy's physician. Mr. Slade sat with his hat on his knees and made a further confession to Dr. Richmond. No, he was not worried about himself; he had found peace and happiness, and if God so willed it that he was to receive this chastisement, he would bear it. His daughter's happiness was what mattered.

Dr. Richmond sat back in his chair, and studied Mr. Slade's gentle and serene old face. No, this old man was no humbug. He belonged, without knowing it, to the community of saints.

"Can anything be done, doctor?"

"By me?"

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Richmond reflected.

"Your wife is my patient—and yet not my patient."

"You mean, sir?"

"Unless she sends for me I cannot very well push my way in."

Mr. Slade looked sad.

"It is her temper, you know, doctor. She always had an ungovernable temper, and there were times——"

"Such as these. And there are times in a woman's life, Mr. Slade, when her emotions may become abnormal, so much so that she may not be responsible for what she says or what she does. Nature finds out the cracks in the façade."

"It is rather difficult for me, doctor. Even if I were to give way to her, sell up my business and go elsewhere, I could not be sure that she——"

But here Dr. Richmond could be emphatic.

"You go? Of course not. Out of the question. Why, you are one of Southfleet's 'Worthies', Mr. Slade."

"I, sir?"

"Most certainly."

"It is very good of you to say so, sir."

"I am not handing out compliments, Mr. Slade. Even if the truth were known I do not believe it would make any difference in Southfleet. Not with the people who mattered."

"You are giving me comforting medicine, doctor."

"Not a bit of it. I am saying what I believe to be true."

Dr. Richmond's counsel carried weight with James Slade. His advice was to leave the problem to simmer. Mrs. Pomeroy might change her mind and her temper, while to give way to that temper would be both unwise and immoral. Dr. Richmond had no love for Mrs. Pomeroy; and perhaps he had not quite forgiven her daughter for choosing young Hallard in place of his son. Not that he would have welcomed the alliance, but paternal prejudice must be served. As for Master Hector, he was an unlicked prig, and a bad lot, and even the charming Rose appeared to have had her pretty head turned. No, let life ferment its own wine.

4

As it happened, Mrs. Pomeroy did change her mind, or rather her temper, for the time being.

Yet another clash with her son-in-law moved her to realize that she possessed powers of coercion, even though they were to be exercised upon the person of her daughter.

And that was what she did, without realizing that the ultimate result would be the slow poisoning of the married life of the two young people. She would regain control of Rose, re-assert her authority. Hector had been insolent to her, and Hector should be taught who was in power.

Mrs. Pomeroy called again on James Slade and was almost gracious to him. Under the new dispensation he might prove to be an asset instead of a social liability.

"I have changed my mind, James. You can stay."

How magnanimous of her! But James Slade was relieved for Rose's sake. He did not suspect the evil that was in this woman's heart.

"Thank you, Clara. You know, my dear, life has taught me that to hurt people may be man's worst sin."

Mrs. Pomeroy accepted the platitude.

"As you hurt me, James."

"Yes, my dear."

Compassion! Yet, if she was capable of such a feeling it was expended wholly upon herself.

XXXI

I

THE spring had come, and Rose, the young mother, wheeled George Hereward out into Caroline Gardens. If all the world loves a lover, it can also feel warmed towards a

young mother and her child. Mrs. Richmond thought it quite a pretty sight to see Mrs. Hector Hallard sitting on a seat with the pram beside her, and George Hereward asleep, or kicking exultantly and making strange noises at his mother. Lucy Richmond was reminded of the days when she had sat on that self-same seat with Charles at her side.

Rose was happy with her son, and all the more so because she was less happy with her husband. The hero had passed, and in his place sat a laconic and absent young man whose secret self seemed elsewhere. Hector was reverting to other attractions. He was away from her all the day, and he would drift away from her in the evening, if not in the flesh, then in the spirit. He did not talk to her about his affairs, and if she attempted to move him to confidence, she would receive some perfunctory response.

"Doing? Oh, just messing about with other people's money."

When he drifted out, she made the mistake of asking him where he was going.

"Where are you going, Tor?"

The question can be irritating to the normal man, but even more irritating to a philanderer who has adventures to conceal.

"To church, my dear!"

Irony is unpleasant in a young husband.

"I was only asking——"

"The days of my catechism are over."

Rose had a streak of her mother's temper.

"Well, you never tell me anything."

"Doesn't that prove my innocence?"

"Oh, stop being sarcastic. I won't stand it. You are away all day, and I might expect——"

"Me to stay at home and play with the baby. Sweet tableau, returning father plays with small son."

They had dined, and Rose pushed back her chair, and walked out through the french window into the garden. She passed out in silence. She picked up a book from a chair and sat down

and pretended to read. These petty wrangles were beginning to hurt her. Hector poured a last tot of whisky into his glass, drank it down, wiped his mouth with his napkin, got up and looked at himself in the mirror over the mantelpiece.

"Sulks!" he thought. "And I'm a damned good-looking fellow. Suppose it's the fate of damned good-looking fellows to have jealous wives."

He lighted a cigarette, went for his hat and strolled out into the garden.

"Dutiful husband come to report. I've got a game of pills on at the Yacht Club."

Rose did not reply. She was beginning to wonder about this husband of hers, and now that the glamour had gone, it was with a vague fear that she watched the man and not the lover. Even the sex-love that she had had for him was fading. That he was coldly and assertively selfish was becoming more evident to her day by day. Also, for a young man he was—in the vulgar parlance—too fond of the whisky bottle; and yet, the prestige of possession still mattered to her, and like many a worried young wife she wished to keep what was hers.

Rose badly needed a friend, and she had no friend. Her husband had extruded her mother from the ménage, and if she thought of appealing to her mother, that dream was to be dashed with sardonic thoroughness. Clara Pomeroy was moving towards a second intervention, and with a motive that was to bewilder and shock her daughter.

During this wilful estrangement "Mon Repos" and "Highfield" might have been miles apart, but one morning Gates appeared with the carriage and a letter.

My dear Daughter, said the letter, I have sent the carriage for you. Leave Georgie with his Nannie. I have a very serious communication to make to you. It does not concern Hector in any direct sense.

I am waiting in for you.

Your Mother.

Why all this mystery, and what did it portend? Was her mother ill, and had she kept secret some thorn in the flesh? Rose decided to go to "Highfield", and she went like a lamb to the slaughter, utterly unprepared for the incredible truth that was to be told to her.

Mrs. Pomeroy had staged the scene. She was in bed, with the blinds drawn, playing that grim old game of "The Devil was sick, the Devil a saint would be". She put out a languid hand to her daughter.

"Come and sit by me, my dear child. But, wait, make sure that there is no one about."

The mystery deepened. Her mother's mood was a challenge to Rose's caution. Was it sincere, or a masquerade in the dressing of the emotions? Rose went out on to the landing and listened, and hearing no movement anywhere re-entered the room, closed the door and sat down beside her mother.

"I have a confession to make to you, child. It has worried me for years. I had the strength to carry it alone, but I am not the woman I was."

Rose's eyes were fixed upon her mother's face.

"Something serious?"

"More serious than you suspect, I'm afraid. It concerns your father."

Rose's eyes widened.

"But he died before——"

"No, my dear, he is alive and you know him."

"Oh, mother! Who?"

"James Slade is your father."

2

Rose's first reaction was one of utter incredulity. She did not believe her mother, but when Mrs. Pomeroy began to give chapter and verse, and to quote the whole sorry story to her, her daughter's incredulity changed to anger.

"Mother, why didn't you tell me before?"

Mrs. Pomeroy was equal to playing pathos.

"Because I wanted to spare you."

"Why tell me now?"

"Because, darling, I wanted someone to share the secret with me. I have borne it alone—so long."

Rose's anger was not to be turned aside. It was like the intuitive anger of the young animal that has been hurt and frightened. The reality and its implications shocked her. She felt her world brittle under her feet.

"He was sent to prison for—fraud?"

"Yes, seven years."

"Oh, mother, why did you bring the wretched old man here?"

This, indeed, was the cry of Mrs. Pomeroy's daughter!

"Because something had to be done with him. I wanted to give him a chance to—make some sort of restitution."

"But—into the hotel, as a servant! How terrible of you!"

"For him, or for me?"

"For everybody. Does anyone know?"

"Of course not."

"And he has never—told?"

"No. He did not dare to."

Rose sat rigid, shocked, staring across her mother's bed.

"The disgrace! The boy! Hector! My son's grandfather was—a—— If it were known—— It would mean——"

Mrs. Pomeroy gave a sound very like a sob.

"You don't think of what I have suffered. You let your husband be rude to me. You drive me out of your house—the house I gave you."

"Oh, mother!"

"I won't be—kept away, and have my daughter and my grandchild taken from me. I can't bear it any longer. I won't bear it. If Hector is still unkind to me—I shall——"

"Mother!"

"I'm a lonely old woman."

"Mother, you wouldn't tell him?"

"I don't know what I might not do if he makes me so—unhappy."

Rose went white. Her anger wilted, and in its place trembled a cold and immoderate fear. If Hector were to discover that she was the daughter of old Slade, an ex-convict who had been a hotel porter and now kept a shop! If other people—! The poor little snob in Rose was scared. She sat and stared, and was devastated by the reality of her mother's reckless rages and the social earthquakes they might produce. Her young face, suddenly bleak and ravaged, she groped for some inspiration.

"Mother, you couldn't do that."

Mrs. Pomeroy's hands lay flaccid, palms upwards.

"I don't know, I don't know. I'm a tired old woman. I want people to be kind to me."

Rose bent over her mother, and got hold of one large, flaccid hand.

"Of course we'll be kind to you. I'm sorry that Hector——"

"I want Hector to treat me as I should be treated. I've done so much——"

"I know you have. I'll speak to Hector. He's selfish and thoughtless—but——"

Mrs. Pomeroy drew her daughter down to her.

"I'm a lonely old woman. I did everything—for your sake. I don't want to be shut out——"

"You shan't be, mother. I promise."

"Kiss me, darling."

The frightened and almost shivering Rose kissed her mother. She was like a child who had been soused in icy water, and was still half-frozen by the shock.

"I'll make Hector understand."

But could she make him understand? Her husband was becoming to her like a stranger who told her nothing, and did not listen to what she said.

3

Had James Slade listened to these two voices he might have understood that there was much of the mother in the daughter, and that in each of them these splurges of emotion were essentially selfish. Perhaps, not wholly so in Rose, whose maternity was younger than the matriarchy of her mother. Mr. Slade might have stood like Hamlet, posed by his own conflicting responses. Cynicism or compassion, which was it to be?

Rose was driven back to "Mon Repos", but the irony of the little house's name was lost upon her, even as Mrs. Hector Hallard had lost herself in her poor, girlish snobbery. She ran upstairs to the nursery where her small son was asleep. She knelt down by the cot and gazed at him, and shed a few tears for him and for herself. Those idle words of Hector's recurred to her. "He looks like that old fellow—Slade." She gazed at the sleeping child and the protest in her was inevitable. Of course, there was no likeness between her boy and that wretched old man. Poor James Slade received no pity in that picture, no daughterly tenderness. He was an incubus, a haunting ghost, a wretched old man.

Rose wept.

"Darling, no one shall ever know."

The respectable fear of that which is not respectable may be the worst sort of cowardice, but a careful selfishness had made of Mrs. Pomeroy's daughter a coward. She did not see James Slade as James Slade. She saw him as a senile threat to her poor little snob world. And then, George Hereward woke up, and stared with surprised blue eyes at his mother, and seeing her face all funny, he became imitative; his small face crumpled; he began to howl.

Rose gathered him up, in a passion of protective tenderness.

"There, there, darling, the horrid old man shall never spoil your life."

It was not revealed to her that her father possessed more than secret shame, and that some day she might discover through him—humanity.

Rose set herself to her task with pathetic eagerness and girlish guile. Her husband had to be persuaded into suffering her mother. Peace between them must be procured at any price. She tried to be very charming to her husband, bought two new frocks at Mr. Golightly's, discovered a new way of dressing her hair, and was ready to provoke Hector to a fresh outbreak of amorousness. She refrained from asking questions. His chair in the garden and his whisky were ready for him when he returned from the city. She sat doucely sewing, or waiting upon her lord's will. She took more trouble with the catering, and was careful to order the dishes that he liked.

When he grew restless and made some excuse for leaving her, she was bright and consenting.

"Of course, dear, go out and enjoy yourself."

In fact she was the perfect wife, and yet her girlish guile had but one result, the provoking in this young cynic and sensualist of a mean suspicion. Why all this thusness? What was Rose's game? Had she some ulterior motive, or was she so much in love with him that she was becoming silly and sentimental? Hector Hallard was piqued no longer by any amorous tricks his wife might play on him.

Having prepared her ground Rose thought it ripe for seed-sowing.

"Tor, dear, I'd like to ask mother in to dinner. Would you mind?"

Hector was much at his ease, and eyeing with interest any woman who passed, provided that she was under thirty. As a matter of fact his taste was growing less catholic, and more tempted by jocund and experienced matrons than by the very young.

His response was laconic.

"Why?"

Rose continued to stitch away at a baby-frock.

"Poor dear mother, she wants to be friends. I think she understands—now."

Hector gave his wife a considering look. Was all this sweetness intended to make some nasty medicine more palatable?

"Well, she can come in and see you, can't she?"

"Yes, but it isn't quite like that, Tor. She feels things. She wants to be friends with you."

"Oh, does she!"

Hector sipped whisky, and reflected. What was the sly old bitch after? Did she want to squirm her way in again, and resume interference? On the other hand he was in rather a mess financially; he had lost money at cards and on horses, and casual amours could be expensive. If he deigned to stroke the old cat he might coax a loan out of her, a loan that would become a gift.

"All right, ask her in to dinner."

Rose got up, bent over her husband, and kissed the top of his head.

"That's sweet of you, darling."

Her husband fidgeted, and frowned. Such sentimental displays in public were not Harrow and Hallard. Moreover, Mrs. Marwood happened to be passing by, and Hector was being tempted to the pursuit of Mrs. Marwood, a large, lusty, black and white matron with Come Hither eyes. Mrs. Marwood was vigorously vulgar, and a provoking contrast to a man with a sentimental wife.

So, Mrs. Pomeroy was asked to dinner by her son-in-law and daughter, and to celebrate the return of authority, as she saw it, she sent the young people half a dozen bottles of champagne. Hector had one opened for her benefit, and his own, and the wine produced a kind of gassy geniality. Rose wore one of her new frocks, and was happily conscious over the evening's atmosphere, and grateful to her husband for his condescension

and vivacity. He even toasted his mother-in-law and her grandchild, and apportioned to himself more than half the bottle.

Mrs. Pomeroy was gracious. After dinner she left dear Hector to his port, coffee and cigar, and went up to see the baby. She had a present for George Hereward, and George goo-gooed at it and at her.

Rose and her mother were alone with the child, and Mrs. Pomeroy was able to speak words that baby ears would not understand.

"I think, my dear, that between us—we can manage him."

"What, baby, mother?"

How dense of her daughter! Mrs. Pomeroy made clicking noises at George Hereward.

"No, the father. After all, a wife must learn how to do things."

Rose looked pensive. Did one have to lie and pretend in order to keep the man one loved, and had her mother made such a success of her own enterprise?

Hector was sipping his coffee, and considering an inspiration that had come to him with the wine. The old woman appeared to be in a good temper, and the occasion ripe for a little gentlemanly business. When Mrs. Pomeroy appeared in the garden, leaving Rose with George Hereward, her son-in-law rose politely and offered her the best chair. Mrs. Pomeroy sat down with evident satisfaction and the consciousness that she and Hector in evening dress, staged a successful social tableau for Southfleet to gaze upon.

"Like another cushion?"

"Thank you, Hector."

Hector fetched the cushion and placed it behind her massive shoulders. Most certainly he was coming to heel.

"I see you've had the hedge cut."

Hector, cigar in hand, challenged her sense of humour with a circular gesture.

"Must see life. Some people don't need hedges."

Almost, Mrs. Pomeroy looked at him archly.

"Do I?"

"Dear lady, how could you?"

He sat down, and Mrs. Pomeroy basked in the sweet glow and the warmth of wine.

"Well, and how is Sir Bertie?"

"Making pots of money. Nothing like being in the know. As a matter of fact he's leaving quite a lot to me."

"Splendid," said Mrs. Pomeroy.

Hector blew a smoke ring.

"I suppose you wouldn't like a flutter?"

"Something good?"

"I should say so. These new oil shares. I happen to know."

Mrs. Pomeroy reflected. She had a nice little sum waiting for a profitable adventure.

"I might."

"Let me put you into it. Say—five hundred."

"Yes, I might."

"Good. Double itself in a year. Make the cheque out to me."

But his mother-in-law was not the financial fool he may have thought her. Make out the cheque to him? The young beggar had some cheek! But if she did so, and he tried any monkey tricks she might have a nice little whip with which to keep the pup in order.

When Rose rejoined them she was surprised to find how genial and friendly the atmosphere had become. Hector was telling her mother a naughty story quite in the Hallard manner, and Mrs. Pomeroy, while pretending to be shocked, was enjoying it.

"Oh, you naughty boy! Rose mustn't hear such——"

Hector winked at the lady.

"No, we'll share the secret."

Mr. Slade, out for his evening stroll, happened to pass "Mon

Repos" while this family party was enjoying the air and the sunset and each other. Hector had just finished another story, and the ladies were laughing. Mr. Slade, though he was not part of the picture, felt that politeness prompted him to raise his hat, but no one of the three took any notice of him.

Mr. Slade passed on, presuming that he had not been observed or recognized, but his daughter had seen him, and had responded with a little secret shudder. That wretched old man, just like a ghost at the party!

Hector too had not missed the passing of Mr. Slade.

"Hallo, there goes that funny old codger. I suppose, Mrs. Hector Hallard will soon be taking our dear son to old Slade's shop."

There was a silence, and it was Mrs. Pomeroy who broke it.

"Yes, my dear, perhaps on the darling's first birthday."

XXXII

I

IN the days of George IV Hector Hallard might have lived as a distinguished and elegant young gentleman who drank himself under the table, whored as he pleased, left his bills unpaid, and was coolly insolent to all and sundry. And yet not quite so, for even the England of the Bucks was not uninspired by a severe respectability. In later days gentlemanly rotters might be sent to the Colonies, and bribed to remain there, somewhat to the detriment of the Mother Country's reputation. For such an Exodus Our Hector Hallard was not yet socially eligible. He was obsessed by a serene and impertinent assurance that if he landed in a bog-hole his relations would be compelled to save a scandal and pull him out. Such sacrifices

were his due, for youth may be so sure that nothing unseemly can happen to a public schoolboy and a 'Varsity Blue.

The sequence of events, as they revealed themselves gradually to James Slade painted a minor "Rake's Progress". Clara had left him in peace, nor did he suspect that his identity had been discovered by his daughter, and this ignorance led him to do a thing that provoked strange embarrassment in Mrs. Hector Hallard. Christmas came again, and Mr. Slade was moved to believe that he could make an innocent present to his grandson. Surely, old Slade of the Caroline Hotel could present Miss Rose's child with a Christmas toy? He chose a very fine white rabbit with boot-button black eyes, packed it in a box, and two nights before Christmas Eve, he toddled off to "Mon Repos" with his parcel. He opened the garden gate, and walking up the path, he became aware of voices, voices so loud and combative that he paused to listen. Two people appeared to be shouting at each other, and their voices were like angry birds battling in the air. No Christmas Carol, this! Mr. Slade stood hesitant, rubbing his chin.

One voice was sufficiently familiar to him, his wife's. She was in one of her tempestuous rages, when all self-restraint was blown to tatters. And the man? Mr. Slade could only conclude that it was her son-in-law.

So strident was the woman's voice that Mr. Slade could hear much of what she said. She was shouting like a fishwife, as though advertising her anger to all Southfleet.

"You've robbed me. I don't care who you are. I'll expose you to Sir Bertie. And I know where the money has gone. On women, my lad, on that vulgar amateur tart—Mrs. Marwood."

Mr. Slade shivered. Well—really! This human cacophony suggested a parrot-house in full scream, shattered glass, the rending of calico. The young man's voice sounded a minor note. The virago was triumphant. She called him a scoundrel

and an adulterer in the good old-fashioned manner. And Mr. Slade wondered. Where was the young wife during this tornado? Upstairs with her child? His surmise was correct. Rose had locked the nursery door, and was sitting by the fire, holding George Hereward in her arms. The discordant argument below had sent the boy off into terrified howlings, but his mother had comforted him, though it was she who needed comfort.

Mr. Slade hesitated. Then, the Spirit of the Lord moved him. Something should be done to silence those unhappy voices. He walked up to the door, and not only rang the bell, but worked vigorously upon the knocker.

There was silence, sudden and shocked. Mr. Slade could hear Clara's voice faint yet admonishing. Maybe, Hector had welcomed the intervention, and had turned to answer the summons. Then there came another sound, footsteps in the hall. The door opened, and Mr. Slade saw his daughter before him with a face that looked dead, and dry of tears.

Mr. Slade raised his hat, and held out the parcel.

"A little present from the shop, Mrs. Hallard, for the boy. Pray accept it."

His daughter's face seemed to melt into sudden emotion. She put out her two hands, and took the parcel into her bosom. Her lips moved. Her voice was a blurred whisper.

"Thank you, Mr. Slade."

"Good night, my dear, and a——"

But he paused in time. No Happy Christmas here! She looked so helpless that he drew the door to for her, holding it by the knocker, and the gentle thud it made had a note of dull finality.

2

Tempests and tears!

Rose had become Niobe, weeping for her lost illusions, and a wet and wounded wife may more easily persuade a man

that the state of marriage can be more insufferable than the activities of the proverbial mother-in-law.

It became known in Southfleet that Mr. Hector Hallard had disappeared. So had that jocund and cheerful animal—Mrs. Marwood. Mr. Marwood, a little, blond rabbit of a man was left lamenting, not his wife's absence, but the money that she had inherited from her father, who had been a prosperous butcher.

It was Eliza who brought the news to Mr. Slade.

"He's done a bunk."

Mr. Slade was rearranging some of the toys in a window.

"Who has, Eliza?"

"Young Hallard. And they say that Marwood woman has gone too."

Mr. Slade pushed a toy cannon into position.

"Perhaps it is—a merciful release, Eliza."

"Well, I don't know about that. Leaving a nice little wife and a child. A rank bad lot, that's what he is and always will be."

Mr. Slade laid hands on a box of soldiers.

"Perhaps, perhaps not, Eliza. Southfleet was not exactly the right playground for a Hector."

Eliza folded her arms over her bosom. She would condone no such piracy.

"What I says is, what'll she do about it?"

"Who, Eliza?"

"Why, Mrs. P. Her Tower of Babel's come down flop."

"Perhaps, perhaps not, Eliza."

Really, Mr. Slade was in a very negative and humanitarian mood! Eliza left him to his window-dressing, and people who came to the shop that morning, found Mr. Slade very absent-minded. He returned too much change to one lady, and charged a small person fourpence for an eightpenny rubber doll. For, Mr. Slade was thinking, "What will happen now? What will become of 'Mon Repos'? Where will she live?" Mr. Slade

was learning to shrug his shoulders over certain frailties, and to realize that Hector Hallard was but a symbol of the common, carnal man, envied in secret by most of the vulgar, and differing from Tom, Dick and Harry only in his opportunities and his success. Hector Hallard was but the average, incorrigibly lazy and dishonest Anglo-Saxon writ large, and that was all that could be said about it.

Rose was left with her child. She might be the happier for that—in the end. There is hope in a child, if in his first five years he can be persuaded to absorb prides and prejudices more tempered and more sensitive than those of the common lout who will slink and rob and loaf when authority is round the corner. Mr. Slade might be a child of God, but he had no illusions about the venality of the common man. It had become apparent to James Slade that women were more the creatures of conscience and of courage than their men-folk. Women stood by Christ, when his dear disciples fled. Judas sold him; Peter denied him. It was a mistake to expect too much from men.

3

Mr. Slade, taking his evening stroll, found that "Mon Repos" was empty and to let. Well, this poor little love-nest had not weathered much foul weather. And where were Rose and her small boy? Gossip had it that Mrs. Pomeroy had taken her daughter and grandson to Dieppe for a month, so that Rose could recover her countenance among strangers. Countenance! Face—as the Orientals called it. What a nuisance to be compelled to remember to keep your countenance in order! A happy face should be able to look after itself.

Mr. Slade strolled on. He supposed that proceedings for divorce were in action, which was true. Mr. Grigson had the matter in hand. Mr. Slade came to "Highfield House". The gates were closed, as though to ensure a decent privacy,

but Mr. Slade dared to open one gate for two inches and peer in. He was presented with a pretty picture, Mrs. Hector Hallard sitting in a garden chair with George Hereward crawling on the grass at her feet. Rose was in black, as though mourning a mate who morally was dead. She was neither reading nor working but just watching her small son playing on the grass.

Then, another figure appeared, marching with matronly sureness across the gravel, Mrs. Pomeroy, her fair hair grown grey above her highly-coloured and forceful face.

"Time for little boys to be in bed."

The voice was the voice of authority. Mr. Slade saw Rose rise with an air of consenting languor. George Hereward was gathered up, and transferred to his grandmother's arms.

He protested.

"Don't want to go bed, Granny."

Said Mrs. Pomeroy, "Little boys must learn to obey."

Mr. Slade closed the gate. So that was the situation! Clara had regained control, not only of her daughter, but of her daughter's child. Poor Rose, minus money and a home of her own, had been caught by those inexorable tentacles and compelled to live upon her mother's charity. Poor, sentimental, hero-worshipping Rose! And what would be the end of it? Would she rush into some second marriage to escape from her mother, or become the docile pensioner, to be gradually repossessed and controlled by a woman with a formidable temper? An evil temper ruled the household in which it lived, a dominant emotion, cowing those who asked for peace. Yes, did he not know it! Sensitive souls shrank from clashes with storm-fiends like Clara.

Mr. Slade, returning to that little red-and-white box in the High Street, was welcomed by its atmosphere of peace. He drew a deep breath as he turned the key. Eliza and the cat would be sharing the kitchen fire with Phoebe; Eliza might be reading *Tit-Bits* after feeding Thomas on other delicacies;

Phoebe would be busy with a novel. Thomas was a neuter, and sleek and large and fat. He was not tempted to go on the tiles.

As Eliza had said, "It makes such a difference."

Mr. Slade chuckled. Might it not be a blessing to the community if half the world's males were like Thomas? Or, you could become like Thomas when the fret of appetite had died down in you. Mr. Slade crept into the shop and lit the gas. He looked about him with a smile in his eyes. Yes, he was happy here, confoundedly happy. He had not asked for much, and more had been given him than he had asked for.

He turned out the gas. Upstairs, a fire and his slippers were waiting for him. He could sit and toast his toes, and read or dream, and no grating voice would disturb his meditations with the cry "James, poke the fire" or "James, where have you been?"

Mr. Slade sat down before the flames, and contemplated them.

"Thank you, John, you gave me the rarest of all blessings—peace."

XXXIII

I

A PERSON may be disliked for various characteristics. Mrs. Pomeroy was disliked by her servants because she was determined that they should neither fool nor rob her. "Perks" were forbidden. Having run a hotel, she was a terror upon detail; her coachman could not help himself to oats, nor her gardener secretly sell the grapes and peaches from the glass-houses, nor dared they sneak off ahead of time. She imposed a discipline upon them which she did not impose upon herself.

She kept her store-cupboard locked, but she did not turn the key upon her temper. And yet, she was not mean about food and wages. She fed her staff well, and they hated her. She imposed her discipline by force and not by persuasion or example.

Gossip had it that she bullied her daughter, and smacked her small grandson. She took the family to church, turning out her carriage for the occasion, for she was becoming a heavy woman, with a bust that matched her formidable posterior. She was apt to grow breathless when climbing stairs. Her face was red and angry and commanding, her eyes more prominent, and suggesting some inward strain. She bullied her tradesmen. Dr. Richmond was, more or less, in perpetual attendance upon the lady. She suffered from blood-pressure, and Dr. Richmond never succeeded in curbing her appetite, or in curing her temper.

Mr. Slade had changed his seat at St. John's Church. He still sat in the side aisle for which he was responsible, but nearer the choir, for both spiritually and socially he was nearer to the Heavenly Choir. Strange things were happening to Mr. Slade. He had been asked to serve upon the general committee of the Cottage Hospital; he had become a member of the Local Board, and a mild embarrassment to gentlemen who wished to grind axes. There were occasions when Mr. Slade was lured on to public platforms, and he had even been persuaded to make a speech. His business was prospering, and so markedly so that he was compelled to take over the premises next door, and add them to "The Toy Mart". He now sold books and stationery, and employed two lady assistants with Phoebe in charge of the new department. He was known to all and sundry in Southfleet. Some of the children were growing up, but they were not lost to Mr. Slade. They called him Uncle James, and to many of them he was friend and counsellor. Local watermen saluted Mr. Slade when he strolled along the parade. "Morning, Mr. Slade," and Mr. Slade was able to greet each blue-

gersied man as Jem, or Bert or Conkie. Maybe he did not know it, but the town thought of him as, "That good old man".

So Mr. Slade went to church, and was able to glance obliquely at the Pomeroy pew and observe those two faces. Clara was more than ever Clara, floridly upstanding and dominant, and unabashed before the Deity. Her daughter was different, thinner, paler, vaguely downcast, suggesting a secret and sad aloofness. She seemed to sit or stand under the shadow of her mother, like some pale flower overhung by a florid, flaunting peony.

Yes, there was no doubt about it, Rose was unhappy, and at the mercy of her mother. Her husband's faithlessness had shocked her pride, and shaken the prestige which every woman cherishes. She had drooped, and in drooping surrendered to her mother's dominant temper. She was afraid of those storms which any opposition might provoke. The high and rebellious spirits of the girl had wilted, and she was in one of those sad and passive phases when misery melts into self-martyrdom.

Even her child was not quite her own. His grandmother interfered in the nursery, and either spoilt or scolded George Hereward. Any protest of Rose's produced some flare of temper or of reproof. Rose had failed with her husband; she might fail with her child. She was feeling a failure, and yet, when the self began to revive in her, it was for and because of her child.

Mr. Slade was to remember that particular morning, a cold, bright winter morning. He was warming his hands over the oil-stove in the shop when the door opened, and Mrs. Hector Hallard walked in. George Hereward was with her, promoted to his first sailor-suit, plus a reefer jacket with brass buttons.

Mr. Slade came erect with a sudden smile on his face. He did not know what his daughter knew, and the ultimate significance of this surprise visit was beyond him, but he did

remember that it was about the time of George Hereward's birthday.

"God morning, madam."

How strange to address your daughter in that way!

"Good morning, Master George."

Rose's eyelashes flickered.

"Good morning, Mr. Slade. I have brought Georgie to see you."

Mr. Slade and the boy looked at each other, and solemnly shook hands.

"It is Georgie's birthday," said his mother.

"Many happy returns, my dear."

He smiled at his daughter.

"I think a present is indicated."

"That is why——"

"But from me. Georgie can have his choice of anything in the shop."

His mother demurred.

"That's too kind, Mr. Slade. I——"

"Not a bit of it, my dear. Birthdays only come once a year. Now, Georgie, my dear, look around and see what you would like."

Mr. Slade studied the child as he glanced solemnly round the shop. Georgie was more Pomeroy than Hallard, and more Rose than Clara. The child had the daughter's eyes, which, incidentally, were somewhat Slade. Moreover, the boy was shy, with an engaging seriousness, and perhaps, like his mother, subdued by the Dragon of Highfield. He had a sensitive mouth, and a nose that was not Clara.

"Well, my dear, see anything you like?"

Georgie looked up gravely at his grandfather.

"Yes."

"What?"

There was a sudden smile on the child's face.

"Lots of things."

Mr. Slade put his head back and laughed.

"Well done, Georgie. Pudding or pie or Christmas cake! You don't want the whole shop, do you?"

"No," said the child, "that would be greedy."

Mr. Slade felt a sudden tenderness towards his grandson.

"We haven't looked in the window, dear, have we? Let's go and look in the window."

He held out his hand, and George put his hand in Mr. Slade's. They went out together, watched by the mother who had seated herself upon one of the shop chairs. Rose's face had a strange, inward look, as though some mystery was being revealed to her. Mr. Slade and the boy stood in the winter sunlight and surveyed the shop window. Georgie appeared to be posed by the number of desirable articles in it, and suddenly his mother rose from her chair and went to the door.

"You must not stand out there in the cold, Mr. Slade, without an overcoat."

Her father's face lit up for her.

"Oh, I'm——"

"No, please go in. I'll help Georgie to choose."

Mr. Slade was obedient to his daughter, but he stood inside the door and watched Rose and her son. Mr. Slade knew that the centre of the picture was occupied by a toy fortress complete with cannon and garrison, and Georgie's finger appeared to be pointing in that direction. There was some argument between them, and Mr. Slade, with a sly smile, gathered that Rose was discouraging her son's desire to possess a present that might seem too lavish.

"No, that's not for sale, darling. Choose something else."

The boy showed no petulance, and Mr. Slade went to warm his hands at the stove. He heard the shop door open, and he turned about and stood rubbing his hands together.

"Well, my dear, what is it to be?"

"I'd like a—a drum, please."

Mr. Slade looked at his daughter.

"A very modest request. Am I in error, but I rather thought that Georgie had his eyes on the fort."

Rose's eyes met her father's.

"Oh, no, that's too——"

"A promise is a promise. Let's hear what Georgie has to say. Now, my dear, would you like the fort?"

George hesitated. He glanced up at his mother, but his mother was looking at Mr. Slade in a strange, fixed way.

"Yes, I would."

"Then the fortress it is, Master George. I shall have to deliver it, madam. It is too heavy for you to carry."

Almost there was sudden laughter in Mrs. Hector Hallard's eyes. Then they seemed to grow misty. This old man was her father, and in spite of all provocations he had kept the secret. He could call her "Madam". She was conscious of a rush of emotion, of inward revelation. This wretched old man! Had she thought of him in that way? Her impulse was to throw her arms about his neck and kiss him, and say "Father, I know."

Her eyes had a misty sheen.

"Thank Mr. Slade, George, for the lovely present."

George put up his face.

"Thank you, Mr. Slade."

So Rose kissed her father through the lips of her son.

2

Mr. Slade might have described the romance as "The Resurrection of The Rose". As for Rose herself she may have dated the rediscovery of herself from that very day, and in rediscovering that virtue, found in it a new force of resistance to her mother. A pensioner she might be, with a little pocket-money from the letting of "Mon Repos", but she began to stand between her mother and her son and to repulse too much interference.

Were there to be scenes? Of course there were, however gently she might put that clutching hand aside, but in Rose the mother became stronger than the woman. She could say, "The child is mine. I will not surrender him to anyone."

Blood pressure and storms! These scenes might be shattering to a sensitive spirit, but Rose found her justification and her consolation in the reactions of her boy. He began to be afraid of his grandmother, this stout termagant with the angry face.

"Come here, George. Haven't I told you not to——"

The child ran to his mother.

"Send the child to me."

Rose gathered up George Hereward and faced her mother.

"Please leave him to me. You frighten him."

"I frighten him! What nonsense! Children need discipline. Put the boy down and leave the room."

Rose went white with protective passion.

"Mother, if you speak so—I shall leave your house."

"Why, you little fool, where could you go?"

"Somewhere."

Rose carried George Hereward out of the room and upstairs to the nursery. She locked the door.

The boy stood at her knees, tearful and bewildered.

"Mother, why is Ganny always so cross?"

"Granny is not well, dear. That makes her so."

Those visits to "The Toy Mart" were repeated. Rose began by finding some excuse to take the child to see Mr. Slade, but in a little while she had abandoned such excuses. It seemed to happen without a why or a wherefore, and with no exchange of questions or of explanations. They looked into each other's eyes and saw something there, and with quiet and mutual comprehension accepted it. Mr. Slade ceased from addressing his daughter as Madam. She was My Dear, and Georgie was just

Georgie. The growing confidence between them was gradual, almost imperceptible, like the growth of a plant that may not be noticed until it begins to flower.

Mr. Slade could say to Eliza, "Mrs. Hallard and Georgie are coming to tea with me this afternoon. Can you give it to us in the garden?" Eliza was astonished. Fancy Miss Rose——! But, of course they could have tea in the garden. Moreover, Mrs. Eliza, when she began to consider the matter in a simple and human fashion, saw no reason why snobbery should be served. Wasn't Mr. Slade good enough for the Lord God Almighty? Wasn't he respected and loved? "The Toy Mart" was much nearer Heaven than was "Highfield".

Mr. Slade had planted a Camperdown elm at the end of his garden, and though the tree was not very old it spread out like an umbrella and gave a circle of shade. Here tea was served, Mr. Slade himself helping Eliza to carry out the dishes, against which she protested.

"You sit down, Mr. Slade. Good afternoon, ma'am."

"Good afternoon, Eliza. And how are you these days?"

"Very well, ma'am, but for my rheumatics. Well, Master George, you are growing a big boy, aren't you?"

"Yes," said George, with his eyes on the cakes.

Mr. Slade sat down beside his daughter. He was feeling the occasion to be strangely valid. Rose, in the shadow, had gentle eyes and a face of repose.

"How long has Eliza been with you?"

"Ever since—those days. She looks fierce and isn't. A good, honest soul to me."

"I'm sure she should be."

Mr. Slade raised his white eyebrows. They were growing rather bushy.

"I don't take it for granted."

"But I think you might."

George had been exploring the garden. He came and stood at Mr. Slade's knees, and looked at him steadily.

"Have you got any snails here, Mr. Slade?"

"A few, my dear, I'm afraid. There is no garden quite without snails, and no—rose——"

But he gave a quirk of the head and an apologetic and whimsical glance at his daughter.

"I beg your pardon."

Rose smiled.

"No life without——"

And Mr. Slade nodded.

Georgie was pressing himself against his grandfather's knees.

"Do you squash snails, Mr. Slade?"

"No, my dear, I'm afraid I don't."

"Ganny does. Ganny gets cross with snails. Do you get cross, Mr. Slade?"

"I try not to, my dear. It is bad for the digestion."

Then, Eliza arrived with the teapot, and George Hereward's attention became concentrated on cakes.

XXXIV

1

HOW Mrs. Pomeroy came to know of her daughter's visits to Mr. Slade is a matter of conjecture, but hear of them she did, and the effect was volcanic. Her very rages were part of the inevitableness of the human scheme as it involved these three people, and perhaps not one of them was conscious of the gradually evolving pattern. Poor Miss Mossett was set to spy upon Mrs. Hector Hallard, a duty she hated, and though she whimpered over it, fear made her obey. So, Mrs. Pomeroy came to be informed that her daughter was paying regular visits to Mr. Slade, that she took the child with

her, and that she did not enter through the shop but by Mr. Slade's private door.

Mrs. Pomeroy waited. The accumulation of anger in her was a fermentation that produced gassy pressures of varying discomforts. Her daughter was deceiving her, a daughter for whom she had toiled and contrived, and whom she housed and dressed and fed. Rose was becoming the friend of that wretched old man whom Clara had sought to enslave, and circumstances had conspired to rescue him from her. Mrs. Pomeroy felt herself to be a most injured woman, and her self-pity and her anger sang together in a scold's chorus.

It all happened on a hot day in July. Miss Mossett came hurrying back to "Highfield", trying to pretend to herself that Mrs. Hallard was treating her mother with great unkindness, though why Rose should not visit Mr. Slade was more than Miss Mossett could say. She found Mrs. Pomeroy trying to keep cool in the garden, sitting in the shade of a tree, and confronting beds of brilliant geranium. The hot faces of the flowers might have been in sympathy with Mrs. Pomeroy's congested countenance, but they flourished in hot weather; she did not.

"Well?" Mrs. Pomeroy's eyes were like angry tentacles waiting to pluck the truth from her companion.

"Mrs. Hallard and the child have gone on the pier, to a concert."

"With—that man?"

Miss Mossett looked as though she was about to sneeze.

"I'm afraid so, yes."

Really, Mrs. Pomeroy's face was very alarming. It looked turgid, contorted, demonic. She seemed to be struggling to get her breath. One hand clutched a handkerchief. Miss Mossett was frightened.

"Do let me get you——"

Mrs. Pomeroy found difficulty in speaking. She lay back in her chair, and fanned herself with her handkerchief.

"Fetch me my smelling salts."

Miss Mossett twittered at her.

"It's cooler in the house. Shall I——?"

"I said fetch me my smelling salts. I am perfectly all right, woman."

Miss Mossett hurried off. Had the telephone been available in "Highfield House", undoubtedly she would have rung up Dr. Richmond. Miss Mossett might be a frightened fool, but she did not like the look of Mrs. Pomeroy. Her mistress appeared calmer and more in control of herself, when Miss Mossett returned with the smelling-salts and a bottle of eau-de-Cologne.

"Wouldn't you like some scent on your forehead?"

"No, I should not. Don't fuss, Mossett."

Miss Mossett thought it best to leave the lady to cool down, but it did occur to her that Dr. Richmond should be notified, and Mrs. Hallard warned of her mother's irritable condition. Miss Mossett was still wearing her hat, and she slipped out by the back gate, and hurried to Caroline Terrace. Dr. Richmond was out, and all that the maid could tell Miss Mossett was that the doctor had been called away to an urgent case in the country, and no exact time could be fixed for his return.

"You might catch him at surgery hours, Miss."

"What time is that?"

"Six o'clock."

"Thank you," said Miss Mossett, and hurried off to attempt the interception of Mrs. Hallard.

But Miss Mossett missed Rose and George Hereward. Mrs. Hallard had parted from Mr. Slade at the pier entrance and made her way homewards by way of the Parade and the long flight of steps leading up the cliff.

Mrs. Pomeroy was waiting like a large and angry black spider under her shadow web. She saw her daughter pass in, holding her son by the hand. Mrs. Pomeroy moistened her lips and spoke.

"Rose."

"Yes, mother."

"Take the child in and come here. I have something to say to you."

2

Domestics have a strange knack of finding themselves in the position to observe or overhear some family fracas, and two maids were concealed behind the drawn blinds of the library windows. There was thunder in the air, and curiosity was challenged. Moreover, the windows were open, and Mrs. Pomeroy's chair under the tree was less than thirty yards away, and her voice became so loud and angry that every word she uttered could be overheard.

"So—my daughter has been deceiving me."

"I beg your pardon, mother?"

"You will do more than that. What do you mean by gadding about with this old scoundrel?"

It was a most unseemly fracas so far as Mrs. Pomeroy was concerned, for the more she raved the cooler and the colder became her daughter's poise. Rose was ice to her mother's flaming temper, and her self-restraint quickened her mother's utter loss of it.

"I don't think you realize what you are saying?"

"I—not—realize! Well, let me tell you that you are going to realize that this is my house, and that I feed and lodge and clothe you. And what do I get for it?"

Rose was standing, half in the shadow, half in the sunlight, looking steadfastly at that inflamed and angry face. Was this creature her mother? This evil, scolding, semi-hysterical hag! There was no anger in Rose Hallard. Shocked she might be, and filled with a new and sensitive disgust. Her mother had become impossible.

The peeping eyes beside the blinds saw Mrs. Hallard turn and walk back towards the house. Mrs. Pomeroy was still

shouting at her, but she might have been shouting at a statue that had been endowed with the power of movement.

"Rose, come here."

Rose walked on.

"If you don't obey me—this moment——"

Could a woman go on believing that a grown daughter was still a child to be scolded and punished at pleasure? Rose walked on. She was not conscious of her body, but of a sudden purpose that had come to life in her. The two maids had a last glimpse of Mrs. Hector Hallard passing into the porch, her face pale and dreaming, her head held high. Then they fled back into the kitchen quarters to spread the news. Mrs. P. and her daughter had had the devil's own row. Rose was walking across the hall, suddenly comprehending her crisis, and that she was walking out of her mother's life. She climbed the stairs to her room, which was next the nursery, and for a minute or two she sat on her bed with a strange, serene, contemplative face.

Then, she rose, opened a cupboard, and took out a bag from under the bottom shelf. Deliberately she packed a few things into it. In the nursery George Hereward was having his tea, and to him appeared his mother, calm and smiling.

"We are going for a walk, darling."

"Where?"

"To see Mr. Slade."

George crammed a last piece of cake into his mouth. They had left Mr. Slade only half an hour ago, but the boy was always ready to consort with his grandfather.

To the nurse Rose said, "I shan't want you, Ellen. You can go out if you like."

Clara Pomeroy, still deep and struggling in her morass of anger, did not see her daughter and George Hereward leave "Highfield", because Rose chose to make her exit by the back door and the stable gate.

•

Mr. Slade and Phoebe had shut up the shop, and Mr. Slade had gone up for his tea when Mrs. Hector Hallard rang the side-door bell. Eliza opened the door to her, and smiled upon mother and son.

"Is Mr. Slade in, Eliza?"

"Yes, upstairs, ma'am, having tea."

Eliza's eyes had fixed themselves for a moment on the hand-bag. Now, what did that mean?

"I'll go up. Would you take George for a little while?"

"Why yes, ma'am. Come along, dearie, into the kitchen. I've got some cheesecakes."

George Hereward put his hand in Eliza's, and to Eliza the mystery was deepening. What had Mrs. Hallard to say to Mr. Slade that the child could not hear?

Rose turned to the now familiar stairs. How strange that they should seem friendly and consoling stairs! She went up them slowly; still carrying her bag. She came to the landing with its window giving a view of the little garden, and for a moment she paused there. Then she knocked at Mr. Slade's door.

Mr. Slade was sitting in an armchair by the window, with his tea on an occasional table beside him. He was reading the daily paper.

"Come in."

Rose opened the door, and stood there holding the bag.

"May I speak to you, father?"

Mr. Slade's paper went down on his knees with a queer, rustling sound. It was like a little shiver of emotion. He looked at his daughter's face, and then at the thing in her hand. Good God—so she knew!

"Come in, my dear. Shut the door. Put that bag down."

"I have left the boy with Eliza, father."

Mr. Slade's hands grasped the arms of his chair. He half

rose, sank back again. He was conscious of her glide towards him, the sudden puckering up of her face. Next moment she was on his knees, her face on his shoulder, weeping. Mr. Slade's arms held her fast.

"There, there, Rose. Tell me all about it."

She sobbed, and he stroked her head, and patted her shoulder.

"I—I can't yet."

"Take your time, dear. Yes, that's right. Just let it out."

Mr. Slade caressed his daughter. Well, well, well, wasn't life strange! He had done just nothing about it, and the fruit had fallen into his lap. So she knew, and yet she had come to him. But did she know all? Mr. Slade's hand went on caressing her in silence.

"Father, I'll tell you now."

"One moment, my dear, do you know everything—about me?"

"Yes, I think so. It doesn't matter."

Mr. Slade drew a very deep breath.

"Well, my dear, life has been very kind to me, much more so than I deserve. I did wrong once, recklessly so. I've tried to——"

His daughter pressed her face against his shoulder.

"Why need you talk about it? Everybody knows what you are. I do—now. I was a silly, vain fool——"

"Never foolish, never wise, my dear. Well, what is the trouble?"

"I have left my mother. I can never go back to her. She's too—too——"

"Yes, I understand. And——"

"I've nowhere to go."

And suddenly she sat up and with a poignant face confronted her father.

"No, don't think I came just for that. I came to you, because——"

Mr. Slade's face shone out at her.

"Just—because? I see. Well, God be thanked for it. You can stay here, my dear——"

She put her hands on his shoulders.

"But don't you see—what that might mean?"

Mr. Slade nodded at her.

"I do. But I don't mind—if you don't mind."

She kissed him, deliberately and lovingly.

"I think you are a saint."

4

Romance was busy in the little house, and so was Rose in the room that was to hold her and George Hereward, when Death came knocking at the door, yet not quite Death, but Gates the coachman out of livery. Eliza met him, an Eliza who had been told things, and who was in a state of wonders—will—never—cease.

"Is the young missus here?"

Eliza considered the advisability of answering that question. A "no" might be a "yes" in this suddenly topsy-turvy world.

"What's that to do——?"

Gates was hot and in a hurry.

"Oh, come off it! The old woman's had a stroke. Gosh, I tell you it was a job carrying her upstairs."

Eliza's eyes goggled under her black eyebrows. Lord God Almighty, what more sensation would this day produce!

"A stroke! Is she bad?"

"The doctor sent me to try and find the young missus. They say the old woman's done for."

"Why, she isn't no age."

"Over-ate herself for years. And then her temper! Great snakes! Well, is the——?"

"You said Dr. Richmond sent you?"

"I did."

"Well, that's good enough for me."

Gates went off to wet his whistle at The George with a pint

of bitter. Gosh, what a day, and what a thirst! Eliza lumbered up the stairs, but she went to Mr. Slade's room. Mr. Slade was the master of all their fates. Eliza did not knock, but opened the door, to discover Mr. Slade lying back in his chair with his eyes closed, and a kind of visionary smile on his face.

"Sorry to——"

"What is it, Eliza?"

"She's—had a stroke. Dr. Richmond has sent for the young missus."

Mr. Slade sat up as though jerked by a spring.

"Good God, Eliza!"

"I thought as you had better tell her."

"I will."

XXXV

MR. SLADE receive that hastily scribbled note from his daughter.

It said, "*Will you please come. Dr. Richmond thinks it is the end.*"

On that warm and starry summer night Mr. Slade took the cliff road to "Highfield". There were lovers on the dark seats, and vague star-sheen over the sea, but James Slade walked like a man in another world, uplifted by the happenings of the most strange day. He saw "Highfield" as a vague black silhouette, a sombre symbol of the fading of human prides and passions.

He was about to ring the bell when the door, which was ajar, swung back like some silent and mysterious door in a fairy story. Rose had been waiting for him there.

"Father——"

"Yes, my dear."

Both voices were calm and gentle.

"Dr. Richmond thinks she has had another stroke. She can't speak, but she is conscious."

"Is the doctor here?"

"No, but he is coming back."

There was silence between them for a few seconds.

"Do you think you ought to see her, father?"

"Yes," said James Slade. "I will see her."

Rose went with him up the stairs, opened the door and closed it after him. Mr. Slade stood a moment, looking at the figure in the bed. Mrs. Pomeroy had been propped up on pillows, but she had sagged down into a limp helplessness. Her poor face looked congested and asymmetrical.

Mr. Slade walked slowly to the bed. He sat down beside it, and placed a hand on one of his wife's hands. It made no answering, intimate movement, but remained flaccid and irresponsible.

"I'm sorry, Clara."

The light from the lamp beside the bed lit up the half-paralysed face sufficiently well for Mr. Slade to see it distinctly. Clara Pomeroy made no sound, nor did her lips move. James Slade was conscious of a strange dumb hatred in those staring eyes.

THE END

AIDE-de-CAMP'S LIBRARY

Accn. No......**658**

1. Books may be retained for a period not exceeding fifteen days.